<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Explicit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>M/M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>The X-Files</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>Fox Mulder/Walter Skinner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collections:</td>
<td>The Basement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stats:</td>
<td>Published: 2000-01-15 Words: 43294</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Same Game X thru XVIII**

by Mik [archived by thebasement_archivist]

**Summary**

To help Mulder deal with the aftermath of a difficult VCS case, Skinner takes him out for a little one on one.

**Notes**

Note from alice ttlg, the archivist: this story was originally archived at The Basement, which moved to the AO3 to ensure the stories are always available and so that authors may have complete control of their own works. To preserve the archive, I began manually importing its works to the AO3 as an Open Doors-approved project in June 2017. I e-mailed all creators about the move and posted announcements, but may not have reached everyone. If you are (or know) this creator, please contact me using the e-mail address on The Basement's collection profile.
SUMMARY: Two men have something to say.
FEEDBACK: Feedback? Well, yes, if you insist...Flames? Send 'em to my brother, he's having a barbeque.
TIMESPAN/SPOILER WARNING: This is an AU, very vague spoilers for multiple episodes, nothing current. Skinner has always been their boss. And I don't give a damn how many arms Krycek has, he doesn't get to play.
KEYWORDS: story slash angst Skinner Mulder NC-17
DISCLAIMER: Fox Mulder, Walter Skinner, Dana Scully and all other X-Files characters belong to Chris Carter, Ten-Thirteen Productions and 20th Century FOX Broadcasting. No copyright infringement is intended and no profit is being made from their use. I'd rather say that they really are mine, but I've been advised to deny everything.
This is for Geoffrey, who gave me permission to play with his characters from "What You Want", for the owners and shareholders of the Chatterers Gallery for their love, support and lifetime supply of "Peeps", and querida Susan, for her brilliant execution of all things beta.

Same Game X - Two Points
by Mik

TO: Bulldog@techone.net

Subject: Wastin' Away in Margaretteville

Walter,

Spooky reporting as directed, SIR! Yet another black hole in Middle America. I've now reached the point in the field assignment where I believe the world would be best served if we cut out the middle of this country, shipped it to Canada, and glued the two coasts together. I know, I know, you like this rural shit, and I can expect to be administratively spanked for that remark when we get home--if we get home.

I'm sure the dutiful Dr. Scully has sent you her autopsy findings. (Just once I'd like to be sent on a field assignment where she doesn't end up spending her days in a morgue. I hate the way she smells when she gets back, and she always wants to discuss it while I'm trying to eat dinner.) (Upon reflection, I should add, she doesn't particularly care for it, either.) If she has also sent you her initial expense report, I can explain item 15. Yes, I did flatten that film kiosk, but I can't help it if I lost control of the tractor. I didn't grow up driving to school on one. Fortunately, no one was inside at the time. I wish that could be said of the donut shop (that would be items 19, 20, 21 and 22). But, fortunately, no one was seriously hurt, and the cops didn't seem too pissed about the patrol cars.

All of the above was a joke. I swear. The only thing I've damaged on this trip was my hip, backing into a gate that decided to hurry and close before I could get out. That won't be showing up on any expense reports. Stand down, Mother Hen. I'm okay. It was a nifty bruise, but other than that, no problems.

This place is dull as...as...I don't know what. I believe the expression is dishwasher, but as I have studiously avoided ever having to wash dishes, it struck me as hypocritical to make reference to something with which I've had no actual experience. I didn't know there were still places where 'blue laws' are in effect. You can't *ever* get espresso after nine here. That's another joke. You can't *ever* get espresso here. Decaf is only for yuppy tourists.

They do get newspapers here, though. Including USA Today and The New York Times. I noticed the little Briggs contretemps is still getting front page play in both. I see they are now mentioning you by name. This doesn't bode well, Walter. Which is the real reason why I'm writing this.
It's just a matter of time, we both know, before public outcry will have you on the carpet and before
the OPR. We also know that will have to be the end of us. With them planning to, as the dainty
Doctor Dana puts, do a rigid sig on your life, there will be no way to hide our relationship.

So, we end it, now, before they end it for us. I guess that's what I'm trying to say, Walter. We stop,
now. Tonight.

There are so many reasons why we should never have started, and it's miraculous that we've lasted
this long. (I know, I know, three weeks may not seem all that impressive to you, but it happens to be
a personal best for me.)

You want me to elucidate? Very well. First and foremost, the obvious. You're my superior, my
supervisor, my boss. Unless you're an elected official, that sort of fraternization is frowned upon.
And then there are those people out there, Them, the Them that will ultimately take me down. I don't
want them taking you with me. Look at my track record. Anyone who gets near me gets burned,
singed at the least. Please back away from me, get out of the line of fire. I've had enough people
martyred for my cause. If you were added to the list, well, I'd probably give up--everything. I'm not
being melodramatic, I'm stating a fact: I lose you, I stop living.

There are so many other reasons. I think, technically, I'm not the most stable person to be in a
relationship. (Don't think I don't hear you saying, 'duh'.) I haven't had a successful one in my life,
going all the way back to the womb. Even if we didn't face having the OPR up our butts, who
knows how long you could be around me before one of us was arrested for justifiable homicide? I
know you like the sound of 'until death do us part', but, really, Walter, I don't think that's what you
had in mind.

And there's that whole 'death do us part' mentality, Walter. Let's face it, you are the kind that was
meant for picket fences and pipe and slippers and all that Middle America stuff. I respect it, I do, but
it ain't me. Can you really see me driving a mini-van? Think what our insurance would be like? I'm
shuddering as I write this. Of course, I realize you haven't asked me, yet, but I thought I'd just save
you some breath. I doubt I can be domesticated or our darling Dana would have done it already.
Believe me, buddy, if there was any woman that could make me sit, stay and come, it would be her.
Lucky for me, I suppose, she's never shown the slightest interest in putting me on a lead.

I know everything I've said has been negative, but there are some positive things I need to say,
before I say goodbye. You've been good to me, Walter. No one's ever been better. You've been
good for me, as well. You've given me three weeks where I've looked both ways before I crossed the
street, just so I could get to you safely. I guess I mean you're basically good. You're decent. I don't
know much about the breed as a whole, but you are. I feel so unworthy when you pull me close and
tell me you love me. At the same time, I want so much to be worthy. I went out here driven to make
you proud of me. I know, I know, you're not my daddy. Fine. But, I've always wanted someone to
be proud of me. Can you blame me if I wish it was you?

So...thanks. I don't think I'll be looking for a replacement. Once you've had the best, who needs the
rest, right?

M

TO: Spooky@touchtone.com

Subject: RE: Wastin' Away in Margaretteville

>Walter,
>Spooky reporting as directed, SIR! Yet another black hole
>in Middle America. I've now reached the point in the field
>assignment where I believe the world would be best served
>if we cut out the middle of this country, shipped it to Canada,
>and glued the two coasts together. I know, I know, you like
>this rural shit, and I can expect to be administratively spanked
>for that remark when we get home--if we get home.

You may get more than an administrative spanking for that remark. Remember that the people who
live in that 'rural shit' pay your salary.

>I'm sure the dutiful Dr. Scully has sent you her autopsy
>findings. (Just once I'd like to be sent on a field assignment
>where she doesn't end up spending her days in a morgue.
>I hate the way she smells when she gets back, and she always
>wants to discuss it while I'm trying to eat dinner.) (Upon
>reflection, I should add, she doesn't particularly care for it,
>either.) If she has also sent you her initial expense report,
>I can explain item 15. Yes, I did flatten that film kiosk,
>but I can't help it if I lost control of the tractor. I didn't
>grow up driving to school on one. Fortunately, no one was
>inside at the time. I wish that could be said of the donut shop
>(that would be items 19, 20, 21 and 22). But, fortunately,
>no one was seriously hurt, and the cops didn't seem too pissed
>about the patrol cars.

I suppose you thought all the above was a joke.

>All of the above was a joke. I swear. The only thing I've
>damaged on this trip was my hip, backing into a gate that
>decided to hurry and close before I could get out. That
>won't be showing up on any expense reports. Stand down,
>Mother Hen. I'm okay. It was a nifty bruise, but other
>than that, no problems.

Dr. Scully informed me that "nifty bruise" was more like a serious laceration that required six
stitches.

>This place is dull as...as...I don't know what. I believe the
>expression is dishwater, but as I have studiously avoided
>ever having to wash dishes, it struck me as hypocritical to
>make reference to something with which I've had no actual
>experience. I didn't know there were still places where
>'blue laws' are in effect. You can't even get espresso after
>nine here. That's another joke. You can't *ever* get
>espresso here. Decaf is only for yuppie tourists.

I suppose, for the sake of your conscience, I should introduce you to the concept of washing dishes.
Your reward will be a decaf espresso.

>They do get newspapers here, though. Including USA Today
>and The New York Times. I noticed the little Briggs contretemps
>is still getting front page play in both. I see they are now
>mentioning you by name. This doesn't bode well, Walter.
>Which is the real reason why I'm writing this.

>It's just a matter of time, we both know, before public outcry
>will have you on the carpet and before the OPR. We also know
>that will have to be the end of us. With them planning to,
as the dainty Doctor Dana puts, do a rigid sig on your life,
>there will be no way to hide our relationship.

>So, we end it, now, before they end it for us. I guess that's
>what I'm trying to say, Walter. We stop, now. Tonight.

I believe that needs to be a mutual decision, and it needs to be made face to face, not via e-mail.

>There are so many reasons why we should never have started,
>and it's miraculous that we've lasted this long. (I know,
>I know, three weeks may not seem all that impressive to you,
>but it happens to be a personal best for me.)

>You want me to elucidate? Very well. First and foremost,
>the obvious. You're my superior, my supervisor, my boss.
>Unless you're an elected official, that sort of fraternization
>is frowned upon. And then there are those people out there,
>Them, the Them that will ultimately take me down. I don't
>want them taking you with me. Look at my track record.
>Anyone who gets near me gets burned, singed at the least.
>Please back away from me, get out of the line of fire.
>I've had enough people martyred for my cause. If you were
>added to the list, well, I'd probably give up--everything.
>I'm not being melodramatic, I'm stating a fact: I lose you,
>I stop living.

I notice you generously omitted the most obvious, that we're both men. I'm not afraid to say it, Mulder. It surprises me that you are.

I don't deny that I'm your supervisor, and I've had more than one twinge over that, but I don't believe that I used my position to bed you. If you think otherwise, I'd appreciate it if you'd state it for the record. If not, let's remove that from the list.

As for Them, I don't give a shit about Them. They've come after me before, and in case you've missed it, I'm still standing. I'm pretty resilient, Mulder. I've been through a lot and come out on the other side in one piece. If They are going to come after me, let them. We'll face Them together. I won't run. And you can't push me away.

>There are so many other reasons. I think, technically,
>I'm not the most stable person to be in a relationship.
>(Don't think I don't hear you saying, 'duh.') I haven't
>had a successful one in my life, going all the way back
to the womb. Even if we didn't face having the OPR up
>our butts, who knows how long you could be around me
>before one of us was arrested for justifiable homicide?
>I know you like the sound of 'until death do us part',
>but, really, Walter, I don't think that's what you had in mind.
Mulder, I've been intimately involved in the worst aspects of your character for much longer than three weeks, and, the occasional need to wrestle with you in hallways or have you committed aside, I think I can stand you.

>And there's that whole 'death do us part' mentality, Walter. 
>Let's face it, you are the kind that was meant for picket fences and pipe and slippers and all that Middle America stuff. I respect it, I do, but it ain't me. Can you really see me driving a mini-van? Think what our insurance would be like? I'm shuddering as I write this. Of course, I realize you haven't asked me, yet, but I thought I'd just save you some breath. I doubt I can be domesticated or our darling Dana would have done it already. Believe me, buddy, if there was any woman that could make me sit, stay and come, it would be her. Lucky for me, I suppose, she's never shown the slightest interest in putting me on a lead.

Yes, I agree that the idea of you behind the wheel of a mini-van is terrifying. The idea of you as a part of my life 'until death do us part' is something else entirely. I admit, I haven't really allowed myself to think too far into the future, but more for your sake than mine. I will now tell you, because I think it serves the purpose of this discussion, I want to have the whole package with you. I want what you describe as picket fences. I want you behind the fence with me. I want to grow old with you. I don't see it happening any time soon, but I like the idea. I like it a lot.

>I know everything I've said has been negative, but there are some positive things I need to say, before I say goodbye. 
>You've been good to me, Walter. No one's ever been better. 
>You've been good for me, as well. You've given me three weeks where I've looked both ways before I crossed the street, just so I could get to you safely. I guess I mean you're basically good. You're decent. I don't know much about the breed as a whole, but you are. I feel so unworthy when you pull me close and tell me you love me. At the same time, I want so much to be worthy. I went out here driven to make you proud of me. I know, I know, you're not my daddy. 
> Fine. But, I've always wanted someone to be proud of me. 
> Can you blame me if I wish it was you?

Mulder, you moron. I am proud of you. I have always been. I've been proud of you as an agent, as a human being, and as someone I would like to spend the rest of my life with. You describe me as decent, but you have no idea. I've done things you don't know about. I've donned the black hat more than once, and I'm not proud of that. But you...there's never even been a speck of dust on your white hat. Granted, it's sometimes at a cocky angle, and it gets knocked off your head often enough, but it remains unblemished. You don't compromise, Mulder. I admire that, I respect it. I am damned proud of it.

And that's my final argument: You don't compromise on anything else, why compromise on this? Be with me, see me through this. You promised me you wouldn't abandon me. I'm calling you on that promise. We'll face whatever outcome together.

>So...thanks. I don't think I'll be looking for a replacement. 
>Once you've had the best, who needs the rest, right?
"All right, who turned up the humidity?" I tugged at the front of my shirt, which was clinging to my chest like an intern on the President. Even the artificial air of the plane was better than this. Nothing quite like D.C. in June. And that is the sign of a benevolent God.

"Quit complaining, Mulder," Scully said wearily. "At least we're home."

"At least," I agreed. I was anxious to be home. I had spent a long, lonely week in downtown taxpayer-ville, a boring case that did little to distract me, and there were lots of things going on at home to worry about. AND I had a few things to say to a stupid, bullheaded bulldog, but if I could get in a little sex first, so much the better. "Wanna' split a taxi as far as the Hoover?"

Scully was stopped, staring slightly open-mouthed. "I don't think that will be necessary," she murmured.

I followed her incredulous stare. "What the hell...? Scully, what day is it?"

"Thursday." She started walking again. "I think..."
"As far as you know, we didn't lose any time in Middle America, did we? It isn't really Saturday, and we're the only ones who don't know it?"

"I don't think so."

I looked at my watch. Six seventeen. My beloved bulldog was standing ahead of us, in jeans and cotton shirt. "What the hell...?" I repeated.

Scully squared the weariness out of her shoulders and strode forward, purposefully. "Sir, this is an unexpected pleasure. Are you meeting someone?"

He looked awkward and surprised. I felt his eyes dart toward me and away. "Just dropping someone off. My...uh...neighbor's daughter needed someone to bring her to the airport."

"Frank?" I blurted.

"Felicity," he said, giving me a disapproving look. Yes, I was home from Oz. That look was blessedly familiar. "Can I offer you a lift?" He reached for Scully's carry-on.

Scully sent me a glance and then turned to him. "Uh...sir, we live in..."

"Yes, I know." He was walking.

Scully and I exchanged looks and started trotting to catch up.

What was waiting at the curb was not his government issue. I couldn't help smiling to myself. I'd had a tiny peek at this thing under the tarp in his parking structure. Electric blue with silver detailing, ragtop. Scully's electric blues went over the flawless Mustang, and settled on the back seat. "There are no seat belts back there, sir."

I gave him a sympathetic smile over Scully's head. The look he gave me was something else entirely. I scrambled into the back seat. "It's okay, Scully. You ride shotgun. I'll risk my neck."

He handed Scully into the car and came around to the driver's side. His eyes came to mine in the rear-view mirror. Okay, I admit it. My heart did a little extra thump and suddenly I was craving chocolate.

I leaned forward, resting my arms on the backs of their seats. "So, didja' miss us?" I asked. I was expected to be a smart-ass. That was the best I could do. What I really wanted to say was 'God, I missed you'.

Scully whipped around and gave me a disapproving glare.

"Of course, Agent Mulder," Skinner answered smoothly. "Life seems almost dull when the two of you are not underfoot." He checked over his shoulder, and nearly bumped noses with me. I swear, if Scully hadn't been in the car... "Now, please sit back while the car's in motion."

I settled back in the seat, obediently.

I felt his eyes go over me once more, before shifting around to put the car in drive. "Did you eat on the plane?" He looked at Scully and then gave me the merest of looks. "I...uh...haven't eaten, yet. Would you like to get some dinner? My treat?"

Scully twisted in the seat as he started maneuvering the car away from the curb and gave me an unfathomable look. "Um...sir..."
I broke in quickly. "Scully, do we object to someone treating us to a meal somewhere that doesn't have the word 'Mom's' in the name?"

Scully straightened in her seat. "That would be very nice, sir," she said politely.

He pulled into traffic. "I trust neither of you has any objection to red meat?" There was almost a smirk to his expression, to his voice, when he added, "You don't, do you, Agent Mulder?"

I saw the surprise in Scully's eyes and I bit down on my lip. "No, sir," I agreed solemnly. Scully shifted the surprise to me.

I gave her an innocent shrug and she sat forward again. "How is the investigation going, sir?" she asked, concerned.

"It isn't. There doesn't seem to be any great desire to resolve the matter." His face darkened slightly. "I believe it would be politically expedient at this point to make a...sacrifice to public opinion."

I hated the bitter twist in his voice at the end of that remark. I looked at Scully and silently pleaded with her. We HAVE to help him.

I didn't need to. Scully was already raising her sword and rushing in. "What can we do, sir?"

He shook his head. "There isn't a great deal that can be done." He pulled into the parking lot of a nearby restaurant. It wasn't a great one, but it was known for dark, quiet booths and decent coffee, and it was guaranteed that the waitresses wouldn't refer to us as 'folks'.

We were seated, and our orders taken, before any of us spoke again. Scully, seated between us, reached for one of his big paws, and patted. "Sir, just tell us what we can do."

I was surprised and jealous and surprised by my jealousy when he covered her hand with his other.

"Agent Scully." He said her name with a tenderness I didn't know he was capable of. "There is nothing you can do. This is becoming a political hot potato. You and Agent Mulder have managed to make some enemies already--I do not want you to add to that list for my sake. Have I made myself clear on that point?"

"But, sir, surely with your alibi, this--"

His face was absolutely devoid of expression. "Agent Scully, the fact of the matter is, I don't have an alibi."

I let out a squeak of protest and they both turned, staring; Skinner in warning, Scully in bewilderment.

Scully looked away first. "Sir, there are alibis and there are alibis. A security tape will show when you left the building. There must have been others who saw you; neighbors, the dry cleaner, the pizza delivery, someone--"

He drew a deep breath. "No. I...stayed late that night."

"Briggs has tangled with you before, hasn't he?" I blurted out.

Scully looked at me again, ready to shush me, but he looked at me, almost gratefully.

"This is nothing more than a set-up to get back at you for something else," I concluded. "What happened? Why is he out to get you now?"
He sighed, his hands still wrapped around Scully's. I doubt either of them was aware of that fact. "I think you've got the wrong profile this time, Agent Mulder."

You liar! "So, what are you going to do? Roll over and let this man take away your career, your retirement, your reputation?"

He met my eyes again, and his were hard with meaning. "Yes, Agent Mulder, that's exactly what I'm going to do."

Oh, shit.

I shook my head. "No."

"Yes."

"No. Damn it, I'm not going to let you."

"Agent Mulder, I don't believe this is your decision to make."

"The hell it isn't." I hit the tabletop with a fist. "Don't you think this affects me, too?"

"Mulder." Scully put her other hand on my arm. "Don't make this more difficult than it already is. We aren't going to abandon him. We know that. Let's not make a scene here." She looked back to Skinner, missing the glares we were exchanging. "Now, tell us everything you know about this man, sir. I'm sure Mulder and I can find a way."

Looking back, it must have seemed like I was overreacting, but at that moment, I was two breaths away from a coronary. "Fuck this. I won't sit here and watch you do this." I pushed away from the table. "I never took you for a coward...sir."

I heard his chair scrape back as I moved toward the door, but I really didn't expect him to follow me. He did. He caught the collar of my jacket, tugged me back against him, clapped a hand over my mouth and muscled me into the men's room so fast and clean, I doubt anyone saw anything.

I was ready to fight him, but he had me against the wall, a forearm against my throat, hissing a command to be quiet, and then he checked the single stall, found it empty, and locked the door. "Don't," he said, tightly. "Don't say a word. Damn it, Mulder, don't you see why I'm doing this?"

"Yes, I do see," I snarled, pushing him away. "You're so afraid someone's going to find out you've been sleeping with me, that you're going to throw away everything you believe in, everything you stand for. Fuck that. I won't let you do it. If you do, Skinner, you'll be throwing me away, too."

He put his hand over my mouth again. "Shut up," he said, silkily. "I'm doing this because I don't want to lose you. You're right, I'm afraid of what would happen if the OPR started looking too closely at me. But, that's not the only reason. There is the inescapable fact that this would put you in harm's way--"

"The bastard's dirty, Walter. He doesn't deserve to get away with this."

He paused and looked at me thoughtfully. "Have you ever heard the expression 'There's nothing so dangerous as a man who has nothing to lose'?"

I shook my head. "I've heard the expression 'Yellowbeards are never so dangerous as when they're dead.'"
He stared at me.

I held up a hand. "Sorry, pop culture reference, but I figured since we weren't in bed, it wasn't breaking a rule." I smiled thoughtfully. "But, I understand what you're saying to me."

"Good." He lowered his hands and leaned into me, rubbing the front of his jeans against the front of my slacks, making me hard and hungry for red meat, Skinner style. "Now," he demanded, biting into my neck. "When can we be in bed? I've missed you."

"After dinner?" I offered.

"Don't order dessert," he growled, and the sound went right to my cock.

*******************************************

"Have you found anything, Mulder?" Scully was routing around in the bag with the coffees and Danish she had brought.

"Nothing concrete," I admitted, my eyes still glued to the computer screen. "A couple of leads. We'll find something." I groped for the coffee she set on the table in front of me. "This guy's been in some dirty shit his whole life. The smell's got to linger somewhere."

"So, you think you can dig up something to scare him into recanting?" she asked doubtfully.

I nodded, scanning yet another police report.

"Mulder, I want to help Skinner, too, but isn't this just a little bit like extortion?"

I took a bite of my Danish. "A lot like it," I agreed around a mouthful of cream cheese. She didn't know so she couldn't understand. I had to find a solution and I had to find it quick. I wouldn't let Skinner roll over on this guy but I couldn't let the OPR put him under the microscope. Already it was affecting us--well, maybe only me, but there was an effect. Here it was Saturday morning, and I was on the floor in my living room with Scully, not in bed in his bedroom with Skinner. I couldn't stand the thought of another week away from him.

"Mulder, you continue to astonish me. I know you've never had any difficulty in bucking bureaucratic policy, but I've never known you to willingly break the law."

"Sometimes you've got to fight fire with fire, Scully." I hit Forward and looked at the next page.

"I cannot believe you said that." She sighed heavily. "I also cannot believe I didn't bring cream. I don't suppose you have any."

"Milk. Fridge." I hit Forward again.

She unfolded herself from her perch on the floor next to me. At the kitchen door she paused and then returned to me, and surprised me by running her fingers through my hair. "Mulder, I can appreciate that you want to help Skinner. I know he's put himself on the line for us many times. I want you to know that I'll walk through any fire you do, but, please, Mulder, I want you to think long and hard before you follow through on this. If nothing else, ask yourself if Skinner would want you dirty for his sake."

"Now, that's just cruel," I muttered, and went on to the next screen.

"We may have something here."

No answer. I kept scrolling back. Three, four, five times. Same agent filing the report. No arrest made. "Scully?"

I felt her eyes on me, and I tore my gaze from the computer screen to the kitchen door. Felt the earth shift, and fall from under me. My new mantra: ohshitohshitohshitohshitohshit.

Scully, at the door, a blackened rosebud in her hand.

XXX

I heard the buzzer at the gate and dragged myself to the keypad. I knew it was Mulder. I had been willing him to come yet hoping he would stay away. I wanted to see him. Thursday night was spent mostly in the restaurant, with me trying to convince them to tilt at some other windmill. We'd had a brief, almost frantic encounter in his front hall after I dropped him off; I never made it fully into his apartment, despite his coaxing and teasing for me to stay the night. He'd offered to set up another 'Hide In Plain Sight' rendezvous for the weekend, and I'd come so close to agreeing, drunk as I was on the taste of him still in my mouth. But, I knew I was under scrutiny. I wouldn't have his white hat smudged over this. Maybe he was right. Maybe it was time to say goodbye, and I didn't have the balls to do it.

I pressed the release, and muttered, "Come."

I'm not sure what I was expecting. Him bounding in, full of sexual energy. Him slinking in, still wearing the wounded expression he wore when I walked out on him Thursday night. Him raging in, having somehow discovered my dirty little secret. I wasn't expecting the reddened, worried eyes, the compulsive swallowing, the way his hands shook as he fell into my arms, mumbling something.

My first thought was he had been hurt. I held him against me with one hand, as I shoved the door shut with the other. I found myself stroking him, searching for extraneous holes, blood, or protruding bones. Finding none, I petted his hair for a moment, and eased him away. There was only one thing that could impact him so severely. "Scully?"

He swallowed again. "She knows."

My reaction speaks to my state of mind at that moment. I was sure he meant she knew about my previous encounter with Briggs. "How did she..." I stopped. Oh. "...find out?"

He shook himself free of me. "Me. I fucked up."

I let him go and he wandered through the kitchen. I followed, watching him look around. I had the oddest feeling he was looking for something—someone. "Do you want a beer?" I offered.

"Only if you've got an arsenic chaser," he said with a smile so grim it was uncomfortable to look at. Reminded me of a skull, sitting on a shelf. I looked away.

I busied myself pulling two beers from the refrigerator. "How did she find out?" I repeated.

He was looking at the bulletin board as if he thought there was a recipe for salvation tacked up there waiting for me to give it a try. "I...she found out." He was hugging himself. "I fucked up."

"Only if you've got an arsenic chaser," he said with a smile so grim it was uncomfortable to look at. Reminded me of a skull, sitting on a shelf. I looked away.

I wrapped an arm around his hunched shoulders, and held the beer in front of him. "What did you do, Mulder?" I said, trying to keep my voice easy. "Leave your diary open to the page that said 'today I fucked Walter Skinner'?"
He made a jerky little nod. "Something like that," he whispered.

I tightened my hold on his shoulders, and took a sip of beer. "Let's go sit down and you can tell me."

He remained rigid before the bulletin board. Suddenly, he raised a hand to the photo and ran a fingertip over the face. "Who is that?" he asked, almost transfixed.

I felt my gut tighten and that burn at the back of my eyes. "Ron Hardy. He was in my unit in 'Nam."

"Ron Hardy...Sean Hardy. No wonder I thought I'd seen him before."

"Yeah, Sean was Ron's younger brother."

Mulder tilted his head slightly, so that he could rest it against my shoulder. "I'm such a prick sometimes. I'm sorry, Walter."

I squeezed him. "It's okay. Flattering as hell to have someone jealous over me."

"I kept the rose I took from you," he murmured. "It was in the fridge. Scully found it."

I held him. He was shaking again. "What did she say?"

"Not much."

"Come on." I turned him and forced him out to the living room where he could sit beside me. "Tell me what happened."

At first, he wouldn't sit next to me. At first he wouldn't sit. He paced, looked out the window, opened a closet, stared up the stairs. Then he settled on the edge of the chair, across from me, rolling the bottle between his hands. Finally, with a sigh, he put the bottle on the table in front of him, and came to sit at the edge of the sofa, turning to look at me. "That rose? I don't know, I got..." he shrugged, helplessly. "Okay, I was being sentimental," he exploded. "She found it. I knew from the look on her face that she recognized it." His voice softened, his eyes dipped away from mine. "At first, I think she thought I somehow stole it from you, and kept it as if...as if...as if I had a crush on you or something. I should have let her think that."

"Did you tell her otherwise?" I asked, wondering, agonizing over how that conversation must have gone.

"Yeah. I got pretty damned indignant about it. I'm not some schoolboy, you know, Scully. Skinner loves me, too."

He shook his head against his hands. "She just handed the rose back to me and said this came as a rather unpleasant surprise and she'd be going now." He lifted his head. "I cut her off before she got to the door and asked her what she was going to do about it."

I felt my middle turn to ice. "What is she going to do about it?"

I had never seen the definition of bleak brought to life so clearly, so chillingly as the expression on his face. "She doesn't know."

I looked at my watch. It was only noon. Yet, there seemed no further point to this day. "Come on, Mulder," I said, catching him under one arm. "Let's go to bed."
He stared up at me. "She could be--"

"She probably is," I agreed, grimly. "So, we may as well enjoy ourselves one last time."

He didn't smile. I had hoped that he would. But he merely stood with me, obedient. It took me a moment to realize why. He wasn't just about to lose his reputation or his career. He had just lost his Scully. He was in shock. Then there would be denial. Then anger. "Would you rather go home?" I asked.

"No, I...I don't know what I want, Walter."

"Fox, did you mean what you said last week? Really mean it, or was it just something comfortable to say at the moment?"

It took him a moment to decide. "I meant it."

"Even in the face of Scully knowing? Even in the face of her reporting us?"

He answered a little slower this time. "I...meant it."

I held out my hand. "Come to bed."

A phone rang as his fingers met mine. We froze, looking at one another in confusion and guilt. Caught? By whom? Whose phone? He reached into his hip pocket, I went to the table near the stairs. My phone.

"Skinner," I said, knowing how gruff and impatient I sounded. I was scared. Scared to be so exposed, scared to face such loss.

"Mulder was your alibi, wasn't he?"

I looked across the room at Mulder. He looked as scared as I felt. I felt this wave of failure rush over me, cold, biting. I had failed to keep him safe. "Yes," I said, simply.

There was a long silence on the other end. "Is he there?"

"Yes," I repeated.

"I want him to know...I want you to tell him..." she paused. It was evident that she was reigniting tremendous feeling. "Please, sir, if you would give him a message from me. Tell him I would never do anything to hurt him."

The tide rushed back out, and left me sandy, but exposed to sunshine. "I can certainly pass that message along."

"And, sir, I expect that you won't, either." There was a razor's edge beneath that respectful tone.

"You can count on that."

She was quiet again. "Thank you, sir." The connection went.

I folded my phone and returned it to the table. "She's not going to report us."

He didn't look as if he believed me. "What did she say?"

"That she wouldn't hurt you." I smiled, weakly. "She also threatened me if I did."
The tension eased in his face. "She's scary, isn't she?"

"Shit, yes."

He laughed.

I came across the room and pulled him against me. "I meant it, too, Fox."

His arms came up and around my shoulders, his fingers digging into my shirt. "I know," he breathed. "I know." He rubbed his face against my shirt and I realized he was brushing tears away. "I'm sorry, Walter. I'm so--"

"For what? For being romantic? Sentimental? Stupid, little prick, I'm flattered. No, I'm touched." I could afford to be generous. I just had my lover handed back to me on a platter. "I think it's the most amazing, fucking thing anyone's ever done for me, or felt about me." I eased back and forced his eyes up to mine. "What's that old expression, 'no blood, no foul'?"

He snickered, ducking his head. "You're a sick bastard, Walter."

"Well, we knew that. Look who I'm in love with."

He nodded, pulling away from me. "No doubt. It's diagnostic. You're a whole chapter in the DSM IV. Axis II personality disorder, no question."

"Shut up." I gave him a little shove toward the stairs. "Get your butt upstairs, and we'll discuss personality disorders."

***********************************************************************

I'm not sure what woke me, but I resented it. I had fallen into an exhausted stupor after Mulder collapsed in my arms and neither of us had moved for hours. It had been decades since I had slept in the middle of a Saturday afternoon. And now something, some one had the audacity to disturb it.

That sound again. The gate buzzer. I decided to ignore it.

Mulder, curled against my side, cheek on my shoulder, stirred, restlessly. I patted his shoulder gently. He made one of those sounds; words with seven syllables, no vowels.

"It's okay," I promised him. "Go back to sleep."

He opened his eyes. "That's your gate buzzer. Who are you expecting?"

"No one. It's a mistake. There, it stopped."

I tried to hold him in place but he was rolling away and to the side. "Can I take a shower?" he mumbled from the edge of the bed?

"Sure. Want some pizza?"

Another of those words he makes up, but I think this one rhymed with 'Sounds good' so I took it for the affirmative. He scrubbed at his face with both hands, stumbled toward the bathroom door and looked back at me. "What time is it?"

I found my watch where it had ended up on the floor in our scramble to see who could remove the most of the other person's clothes the fastest. I squinted at it. "Ten after five."
"Huh."

I heard something else as he stepped under the water. My doorbell. Whoever had been trying to get me had evidently just begun ringing buzzers until someone let them in. I pulled my bathrobe on, collected my service weapon and tucked it into the pocket and went downstairs.

I almost didn't see her, peering out the peephole. I caught a glimpse of red hair and pulled the door open. Her eyes were downcast, her lip worried between her teeth. As I opened the door, however, her eyes came up and over me.

I know what she saw. I know what it looked like. I was rumpled, without my glasses, in nothing but hastily gathered bathrobe, still sticky from semen spilled on my chest hours ago. "Agent...Scully..." I began, having no idea where to go from there.

She came across the threshold, avoiding my eyes. "He's still here, isn't he?"

"He's taking a shower," I confessed. "Agent Scully, I know this must be very--"

She put a hand up. "If it's all the same to you, sir...I'd rather not discuss this right now. I just came here to--to reassure you--both of you--"

She was struggling and it was painful to watch. "Agent Scully, perhaps you'd be kind enough to start a pot of coffee while I put some clothes on?"

She looked relieved and nodded. "Yes, sir." She turned toward the kitchen.

"Walter, did you ever--" Mulder staggered to a stop. In jeans, barechested, barefooted, toweling his hair, he had ambled down the stairs, unaware that I was not alone. He lifted his head and stared at her and his expression was heartbreaking. So was hers. I didn't know who I felt sorrier for. "Scully."

She lifted her chin, met his eyes, purposefully. Dana Scully would have made a damn fine soldier. "Mulder, I just wanted to assure you that I'm not going to make an issue of this..." She lowered her eyes for a fraction of a moment. "...breach of protocol," she finished. Suddenly, she looked up, her eyes flashing that blue fire that Mulder called 'scary'. "But, Mulder, if you love this man the way you claim to, you might keep in mind you're the only thing standing between him and a formal investigation." She turned away. "Good afternoon."

-THE END-

TITLE: Same Game: Part XII - Technical
NAME: Mik
E-MAIL:
CATEGORY: SRA
RATING: NC-17. M/SK. This story contains slash i.e. m/m sex. So, if you don't like that type of thing - STOP NOW! Forewarned is forearmed. Proceed with caution.
SUMMARY: Sometimes it's HOW you know.
FEEDBACK: Feedback? Well, yes, if you insist ... Flames? Send 'em to my brother, he's having a barbecue.
TIMESPAN/SPOILER WARNING: This is an AU, very vague spoilers for multiple episodes, nothing current. Skinner has always been their boss. And I don't give a damn how many arms
"Hands and knees."

I complied. I was too hot and horny to think how ridiculous I might look with my ass in the air. His hands were sliding over my hip, my thigh, my ass, as if he was examining horseflesh. I didn't care. I'd be his pony-boy for the night if it would take that lost, slightly vacant look from his eyes.

It had been a miserable three weeks. My so proud bulldog had been relieved of duty 'pending an investigation'. They actually sent security to watch him empty his drawers and escort him out of the building. Everyone knew there would be no investigation. It made my blood boil, but the powers-that-should-but-don't made it very clear Scully and I were not to pursue this ex officio or we'd suffer the same ignominy. I can't swear to it, but I'm pretty sure they had security watching us that afternoon to see if we'd made some attempt to catch his cross if he stumbled.

It made it hard for us to be together. I managed to find a place we could rent by the week, no questions asked, but our time together was so tainted by what had happened to us that sex was rare and frequently had the flavor of mindless duty.

But, there was that bright pink of sunrise on the horizon. Scully and I had pulled together a series of 'investigations' over the years that clearly showed someone on the outside helping someone in the Bureau and we now knew who both someones were. We hadn't discussed it with him, because what we were doing was just a tad on the side of dirty and I didn't want him to be asked, under oath, if he knew anything about it.

My optimistic mood had followed us into the bedroom this fine Wednesday evening, and Walter seemed to actually be interested in a little serious pin-the-tail-on-the-Mulder. His hands were warm and smooth, sliding over my skin. He pressed a hot kiss to my shoulder. "You feel good," he said against me.

"I could feel better." I wiggled my ass at him.

"I don't know how." His hand slid down between my cheeks and rubbed lazily.

I did feel good; his mouth working to leave permanent brands on my shoulder and his fingers working to leave permanent brands on my libido. I wanted to hurry him a bit, but I wasn't going to do anything to break the mood.

"That's good."
"Is that a question or a statement?" I grunted. "If that's a question I would have to say yes. If it's a statement--Skinner!" I know I yelped as his fingers parted me and his thumb probed my butt. I wasn't prepared for that. We hadn't gone in that direction since we first discovered this weird and wonderful attraction to one another. I had almost gotten the feeling that once I returned the favor, he was unwilling to put it back on his tab. So we had satisfied ourselves with groping, rubbing, stroking, sucking and some mind bending make-out sessions.

His other hand came up to stroke my side. "Did I hurt you?"

"No," I lied. "Just caught me by surprise."

I felt his fingers tighten on my hip. "I really want to make love to you," he said quietly. "Be in you."

This was an unexpected quality to find in the bulldog; this sweet, almost romantic diffidence. He was, by nature, by position, by experience, a very controlled, take-charge individual, but the more comfortable we became in one another's presence, the more he allowed me glimpses of something softer underneath. No. Not soft. There was nothing soft about this guy and I like it that way. But this shyness, this profound desire to do what will please me is incredible and at the same time intimidating. I can never give him access to the places where I'm vulnerable and it's damned unfair.

"Mulder?" He sounded slightly anxious.

I looked over my shoulder at him. "Help yourself, bulldog."

He was sliding both hands over my ass, but he paused. "What?"

I was reaching for pillows. "I said to go ahead. I'd like that."

"What did you call me?"

"Ummm ..." Oh, shit, did I say that out loud? "...bulldog?"

He surprised me again. He laughed. His eyes widened, his face opened up and he genuinely laughed. He smacked me on the ass, causing me to tumble over, then he gathered me against him. "I never know what to expect from you." He let us both fall so that we were a tangle of limbs and sweat on the hotel sheets.

I twisted around until I could study his face. He looked relaxed. The first time in weeks. It wasn't the way I wanted to get him there, but hell, whatever works. "Well, that's your email nick, isn't it?"

"Yes." His fingers tangled in my hair. "It just sounded so strange coming out of your mouth."

"Yeah, well, speaking of my mouth ..." I started licking my way up his nearest pec.

I felt him drag me up so that our mouths could meet. There was a hunger in his kiss that had been absent for a while. I climbed up and swung a leg over his stomach, rubbing my ass against his cock, thinking it might remind him where we left off.

The kiss ended abruptly. He pushed at my shoulders until I sat up and looked down at him. "What is it?" I asked--well, no, whined. "Am I hurting you?"

"No." His hands slid down my sides and settled at my hips. His dark eyes went over me. I swear I could actually feel them touch me. "This has been so good," he said softly.

"Uh ... 'has been'? I don't think I like the sound of that."
"We can't keep it up, Fox, you know that."

I rocked back against his cock, still hard, though starting to lose its urgency. "I'll bet I could if you let me try."

"No." He held me still. "This, us. It's going to get you killed."

"You playing dangle and jerk is going to get you killed, Mister. Don't be a cock tease. Come on."

I tried to lean toward him and kiss him, but he held me firm.

"Listen to me. There are things about this case you don't know."

"I know more than you think, bulldog." I knocked his hands away, and settled flat against him, trying to nuzzle up against his neck.

"No. You don't know it all. And if you keep trying to figure it out, you're going to be hurt." He caught my face between his hands and held firm. "Listen to me. This is a righteous bust."

I wanted to laugh. You know that nervous little giggle you get when you hear something embarrassing, or incredible? It was the laugh you'd let go if you caught someone coming out of the bathroom, with his dick still hanging out. Stupid, adolescent, Beavis-Butthead-huh-huh-you-said-bust. But, at the same time, I wanted to scream at him for saying something about the man I believed in. "Walter, there is no way you could have done that. You were with me that night, and I'd have told OPR that if you hadn't handcuffed me about it."

His fingers played over my cheeks and lips. "Do you remember that night at the restaurant, when you said I'd tangled with Briggs before?"

"Yeah." I sat back and looked down at him. "And you told me I was riding the wrong profile."

"I lied."

Something hissed in my head. "Oh?" I dismounted and settled, cross-legged on the bed beside him. "Tell me about it."

He rolled onto his side, fixed his eyes on my knee and then, with palpable effort, brought his eyes to mine. "I had occasion once, many years ago, to offer him two very disparate options, sort of Truth or Consequences."

He began to tell the story, slowly, as if it was being sucked out of him by a stomach pump, and just as messily. It was a horrible story about a pimp and kidnapped boys and cocaine.

I took it as long as I could. "But, all you have to do is tell the OPR this guy's got history with you--"

"Mulder, his accusations are still true," he cut me off. "It doesn't matter if it happened last week or last decade, it's still true. I violated basic law enforcement principles. The man has, as they say, a legitimate beef."

No. I don't believe it. I won't. "Okay, so how is it going to get me killed?"

"Because, if you go to the OPR and give them our alibi, you expose yourself, but basically, for nothing. And you know, once you are exposed, you're dead. You know that."

"So, you sit back and let him literally get away with murder this time."

"Agent Mulder." That tired sound was back in his voice. "There is the inescapable fact that what I
did was illegal and--"

"The bastard's dirty, Walter. He doesn't deserve to get away with this."

"What I did was dirty, too," he insisted quietly. "I don't deserve to get away with that."

"You did what you had to do to get a killer off the street."

"So, the ends justify the means to you, too?"

That hurt. Me, riding at the head of the company, with Truth as my banner. "No." I unfolded myself and slid off the bed, groping for my pants. I'm gonna' find this fucker and force-feed him MY gun. "Where are you going?"

"No place," I answered, flatly. "Just, if we're not going to have sex, I might as well have some dinner. I missed lunch today because I wanted to be able to get out early."

"Fox ..." He reached for me. I didn't mean to brush him off, it just happened. I left him in the bedroom and went out to what passed for the kitchen in our little 'honeymoon' cottage.

He came out a few minutes later, still naked, dragging his hands over his scalp. He came up to the chair where I was slumped, flipping channels, and frowned down at me. "What are you eating?"

I looked down at the bowl in my hand and then up at him. "Cap'n Crunch. Why?"

He stared at me. He gets this look of sort of stunned disbelief that always makes me feel that a dinosaur has come to life behind me, or Elvis rose from the dead or something.

"What?"

He shook his head. "Nothing." He went to the windows on the other side of the room and peered out. The way he stood there, fist on hip, body cocked to one side, it looked almost as if he was ... posing for me.

Well, I couldn't help it. I came close to drooling. "You look pretty good in profile, if you'll pardon the expression."

He turned just to give me half a smile. "I've always said you were good for my ego."

"Oh, EGO," I snorted. "I always thought I heard you say ulcers."

"Oh, those, too." He looked back at the window.

I put the bowl down and came along beside him. I wanted to touch him, feel him, find some way to reassure him, and bring him back to me.

I must have made some kind of sound, expressed my need some way, because he finally turned from the window, and right into my arms. For a moment, we only kissed. 'Only' is such a misleading word. It implies that we did nothing more than press our mouths together when in truth, we were passing our need, our curiosity, our hunger to one another. I wound my arms around his thick, bull neck and he slid his fingers up under my shirt to stroke my skin, drag his nails across my nipples, making me moan into his mouth.

I backed out of his kiss and went to the sofa. For a moment, I considered untying my shoes, and then I just kicked them off. As I straightened, I found him at my side, his cock so hard it was almost
against his belly.

Impulsively, I dropped to my knees and took the crown into my mouth, flicking my tongue rapidly along the ridge. This elicited a loud groan from him and I felt his fingers grope for and find my shoulder. After all this time wanting him and unable to arouse him, his reaction was as exciting for me as anything he had done or might do this evening.

I started to suck in earnest and his fingers and balls both tightened. I pulled away and settled down on the sofa to strip off my socks. Standing to work off my slacks, I found his fingers at the buttons of my shirt.

In another minute I was on my back, knees pushed impossibly high, his face buried between my legs. I tried, I really tried to contain myself, to savor the sight of his bald head framed by my thighs, the sensation of that perpetually frowning mouth smoothed around my cock. But I was writhing and whimpering so bad, he backed off of me and growled, "Turn over. Now."

Finally!

_________

Well, it wasn't exactly the reaction I had expected, I'll give you that.

We'd nailed the bastard. He was in our hands, singing arias of guilt. He was recanting. He was confessing. He was revealing all, in a scared, whiney little boy voice. In another ten minutes, I figured we were not only going to have Walter back riding our ass as A.D., but we were going to find the whereabouts of Jimmy Hoffa and Amelia Earhardt.

Walter was standing at the back of the room, listening, arms folded over his chest, silent and still. Every few minutes, I'd sneak a peek, first at that OPR Queen, and then at him. She was melting, blushing, ready to grovel, and Walter was getting stonier and stonier. Finally, Ms. Cassidy leaned over and murmured something at him, and he nodded, politely, turned and walked out.

I excused myself a few minutes later, eager to start celebrating.

He was in my office, and he didn't look ready to party.

"Congratulations ... sir," I said, wanting to embrace him.

I was surprised and annoyed when he held me off. "I gave you a direct order," he said, coldly.

I backed up a step at the tone in his voice. "Excuse me?"

His face was stony, but reddened in unexplained anger. "Not two days ago, I told you to back away from this."

"Oh, I didn't realize you could give direct orders in bed," I snapped.

It took to that moment to acknowledge that he was shaking. "I am your direct supervisor, your superior. I gave you an order. You disobeyed me."

I found myself starting to shake. "Disobeyed you?" I slammed the folders in my hand down on the desk. "Damn it, Walter, this isn't about the Bureau. This is about you. About us. I did this for you. Don't you understand that? You can't bust my chops for--"

"You disobeyed me, Fox. Don't you understand that?"
I stopped shaking. I froze. I mean, dropped to zero degrees Fahrenheit. "What are you going to do? Spank me?" I asked quietly.

"Don't tempt me now, Fox."

"Don't Fox me. We're on company time. You can call me Mulder. Or Agent Mulder. You don't have the right to call me Fox, here." I turned away from him. I stung everywhere. I had been slashed to ribbons and hadn't even heard my dangerous darkness coming. "I don't think you have the right to call me Fox, anywhere. I didn't realize how little respect you have for me." And I didn't realize how much that would matter.

-END of part 1-

Attention: I DID NOT WRITE THIS STORY. I'm posting this for my friend, fellow author, and brother in arms, Mik. Please send all feedback to Mik at Nope, nope, absolutely not responsible. Don't blame me. Honest. Take it up with him. -frogdoggie aka Jay Fox

TITLE: Same Game: Part XII - Technical

(Part 2 of 2 parts)

NAME: Mik

E-MAIL:

CATEGORY: SRA

RATING: NC-17. M/SK. This story contains slash i.e. m/m sex. So, if you don't like that type of thing - STOP NOW! Forewarned is forearmed. Proceed with caution.

SUMMARY: Sometimes it's HOW you know.

FEEDBACK: Feedback? Well, yes, if you insist ... Flames? Send 'em to my brother, he's having a barbecue.

TIMESPAN/SPOILER WARNING: This is an AU, very vague spoilers for multiple episodes, nothing current. Skinner has always been their boss. And I don't give a damn how many arms Krycek has, he doesn't get to play.

KEYWORDS: story slash angst Skinner Mulder NC-17

DISCLAIMER: Fox Mulder, Walter Skinner, Dana Scully and all other X-Files characters belong to Chris Carter, Ten-Thirteen Productions and 20th Century FOX Broadcasting. No copyright infringement is intended and no profit is being made from their use. I'd rather say that they really are mine, but I've been advised to deny everything.

This is for Geoffrey, who gave me permission to play with his characters from "What You Want", for the owners and shareholders of the Chatterers Gallery for their love, support and lifetime supply of "Peeps", and querida Susan, for her brilliant execution of all things beta.

If you like this, there's more at http://homepages.go.com/~frogdoggie/3wstop.html

If you didn't like it, come see me, anyway. Pet the dog.
Everything was blood red. Damn it, I poured my guilt and grief out to him and he didn't care. He went right on, charging into things like a spoiled brat wanting his way. Who gives a rat's ass if it's right or wrong? Agent Spooky Mulder wants it, consequences be damned.

I had been dragged into the Bureau on a moment's notice to face one of my greatest failures. He had not aged well. What hair he still had was long, stringy and shock white. He had the gaunt and hopeless look of a man who despairs surviving 'til his next fix. His eyes were hollow and wild. And his voice was sharp and breathy and fearful, but compelling.

And now Mulder had the nerve to look wounded because I wasn't thrilled with his stolen offering. "What did you do?" I rasped, ignoring his murmuring.

He blinked at me, reminding me of a puppy who encountered a closing door. "Nothing." There was an uncharacteristic lack of belligerence in his voice I should have noted. "I got him to recant."

"HOW did you get him to recant?" I persisted, with harsh patience. "What persuasion did you employ?"

"Nothing," he repeated. Something flashed in his eyes, green flares going off. "What difference does it make? He lied and then he told the truth."

"What difference does it make?" I grabbed his shoulders and shook him, the grief and guilt bursting out of me yet again, now heavily laced with rage. "Fox, didn't you hear me the other night? Didn't you learn anything from my mistake?" I don't know what hurt more; the loss of innocence, that he didn't see the loss, or that he lost it for me--another sin that I would have to silently seek absolution for the remainder of my life.

Now I had the reaction I had expected and it was too late to turn it off. He brushed me off, angrily. "Don't pull that bullshit on me, Skinner. I got you back your career. I gave you back your fucking life. Don't go morally superior on ME."

"It's no favor when I'll have the guilt of what you've done over my head."

His eyes narrowed to flat, green lines. "... 'the guilt of what I've done'? Who do you think you are? My father? What gives you the right to assume responsibility for my actions, in or out of bed? What I do is my responsibility, Walter Skinner, not yours."

The 'blood red' was back, staining everything. "You are my subordinate," I reminded him, heatedly. "Your actions in the line of duty are my responsibility."

"Subordinate," he repeated. "I guess that's what I'll always be in your eyes."

Then it hit me. The words he had muttered came back to me. But I was too damned mad to reach for him. I just stood there, glaring. Dying inside.

He angled one dark glance up at me. "It's nearly six, sir. I'm off duty. Do you need my itinerary for the evening or shall I just report back to you on Monday?"

I swallowed painfully. "No, Fox, we're not doing this again."
He stood up very straight. "Even though I'm off duty, sir, that still does not give you the right to address me that way."

I took a step toward him and was irritated that he backed away. "There's no point in walking out on me. At least have the courtesy to discuss this."

He shrugged on his jacket. "There's no point in discussing this. I thought I was helping you. I didn't know I was burdening you for life."

My pride wanted me to let him go. Something else overruled, the something that remembered those hellish days last month when I let him walk out. I wasn't willing to let him walk out again. Even if it meant groveling just a bit. "Please, Fox. We can work this out. I--I was angry. I overreacted. Let's have some dinner and ... and work this out."

"No, sir." He adjusted his tie, and reached for his briefcase. "Excuse me, sir." He turned and reached for the door.

I lunged. "Listen to me." I had him stopped and I didn't know what to do. I searched his face, hoping for inspiration. "I love you."

That touched him. I saw the feeling ripple through his body. And the defiance in his expression softened to something akin to regret. He lowered his eyes. He spoke very softly. "I'd rather have your respect than your love." He shouldered me out of the way and pulled the door open. "Good night."

I'm not sure how long I stood there. Long enough, I suppose. I was caught, mid-mourning, by Scully as she came through the door, eyes focused on the file in her hands. She bumped me, looked up, murmured a faint, "Excuse me, sir," paused and looked away.

If I hadn't just had a large piece of my internal structure sliced out of me, her obvious discomfort in my presence would have pierced me. As it was, I felt the glancing blow and winced. We had not had much contact since that Saturday afternoon in my condo, but those rare times we had seen one another, others had been around, and I must say, she maintained her poise much better than I. This, however, was the first time we had been alone since her discovery.

"Agent Scully," I said, stiffly, and reached for the door.

She raised her eyes again, looked around the office, and zeroed in on me. "Where is Mulder?" she asked.

Well, that caught me by surprise. Not 'Agent Mulder', just 'Mulder', informal, almost the same as asking 'where is Fox', almost the same as asking 'where is your lover'. And the tone of her voice did not match her usual reserve and respect. She was clearly disconcerted to see me there, and alone.

"He ... uh ... left." My fingers curled around the doorknob. I could jerk the door open in my usual, abrupt manner, or I could linger, see if she'd give me an opening. For what? How the hell should I know?

She looked at her watch. She looked at the clock over the door. She looked as if she might come look at my watch. "Early for him. Did you have ..." She glanced around. "... plans?"

"We did."

Her bright blue eyes came back to me. "Oh?"
I sighed. I did not want to come running to her with our difficulties, but if anyone could give me insight on Fox William Mulder, it was she. This woman had a Ph.D. in the subject. Still, I wouldn't force her to become involved in something she clearly wished to have no part in. "It's a long story, Agent Scully," I said brusquely, "and not one I believe you would be comfortable hearing."

She surprised me once again. Something in her expression softened. She came near me, looked up and said, "Keep in mind that he did it for you."

"I told him ..." I stopped. If this office was under surveillance, we were all done, anyway. "I told him not to. A direct order."

She smiled. It was a small smile, the kind that comes when you're trying so hard not to laugh out loud. "And since when has that meant anything to Agent Mulder?" She put her hand on my wrist, and pulled. "Come sit down." A beat later she added, "sir."

I resisted. "Agent Scully ..."

She pulled again. She's strong. I don't think it was physical strength that brought me to Mulder's battered chair, but the strength of her conviction. In a moment, we were face to face, knee to knee. And she began, oh so delicately, to put words together. "I don't understand this relationship, sir. It's very difficult for me. Not so much the homosexual aspect of it, although that surprises me, and yes, it does cause me some personal conflict." She paused. "It's the fact that you are his direct superior that disturbs me. I never thought you would breach protocol like that."

I looked down at my hands. Then I looked at hers, folded neatly in her lap. I looked again. Her knuckles were white. "Do you feel he was coerced into this relationship?"

"No."

I looked up. "Then what is it?"

"Just because Agent Mulder is a willing partner in this arrangement does not mean that it is right."

She might just as well have said, 'Walter Skinner, you KNOW better.' I nodded. "He shouldn't have done this. Briggs was--"

"--telling the truth?" she broke in. "I know. But, sir, he was still dirty."

"How did you know?"

She smiled again. This was softly smug. "He tells me everything. I'm his partner."

"He didn't tell you about us," I pointed out.

She stopped smiling. "No." Her eyes skittered up the wall, to a poster with a stereotypical spacecraft and the legend I WANT TO BELIEVE. She brought her gaze back to me. "And that should tell you something."

I looked at the poster. I didn't see it. I looked at her, brows arched.

"He was protecting you."

Then I could see it. He would risk alienating his partner for me. Before I could reply, she added, "He tracked down Briggs and made him recant, for you."

"He got that confession with threats and extortion--"
"Sir." She pressed one hand against my knee, lightly. "There are only two people in the entire world Mulder would sacrifice truth for. I believe one of them is me. I think the other is you." She pulled her hand back. "The question is, are you willing to accept his sacrifice?"

I hadn't really thought of it as his sacrifice. And it was. Shit. And I reamed him for it. I pushed the chair back and stood. "Thank you for your interpretation, Agent Scully."

She stood, too. "Sir."

I looked down at her.

There was a well of feeling in her eyes so deep I was suddenly in danger of drowning. "Yes, Agent Scully?"

"I don't ... that is ... my personal feelings aside ..." She bit down on her lip, struggling to keep that well from splashing over. "You will not hurt him."

Damn it, now I had a lump in my throat. "No, Agent Scully. Not if I can help it."

I moved toward the door. "You know, I shot him once," she reminded me.

I looked over my shoulder at her. "Yes."

The light overhead glinted off her eyes, making them gunmetal blue. "I'm a damn good shot."

I chuckled, in spite of the grimness of the situation. "I'll bear that in mind, Agent." I left her.

_____

I didn't expect to find him at the motel, but I drove by anyway. He had checked out. Left a note for me to pick up my things in the Manager's office. A rather humiliating experience, given the curious and slightly contemptuous demeanor of the manager. I drove by his place, since it was on the way home. His car wasn't there. For one moment, I had hope. Perhaps he was waiting at my place. And then I was filled with dread. I'm not sure why.

No. He wasn't there. I was returning to my empty house. Alone.

I toured the place that evening, restlessly. There were landmarks, if you will, of our relationship. It was like a pilgrimage: the hallway, those first desperate hungry kisses; the kitchen, him naked, him hurting, him laughing over bacon and eggs; the living room, more pain, and more pleasure; the stairs, his uncertainty; the window where he stood reading Kerouac and drinking my scotch; my bedroom, unbelievable sex, and sweet slumber. But I kept coming back to that place in the hallway. So much had happened there. I had held him while he grieved what he thought would be the loss of his partnership, I had ravished him against the door, I said goodbye to him once. I was not willing to say goodbye to him again.

I went to my phone to make a call that every fiber in my Y chromosome screamed against. The male ego said let him go, he'll come back. But the male heart said, he won't unless I ask, and I must ask.

He answered with a soft, and almost broken voice. "Mulder."

"Fox. I want to talk to you. I need to talk to you. Please come over."

He sighed, heavily. "There's nothing to talk about."

"I think there is."
"Look, I don't want to do an episode of Friends, here."

I smiled. I didn't know what the hell he was talking about, but if pop culture was creeping into the conversation, there was hope. "Fine. But, you need to know that I realize I overreacted."

There was silence. "Fine." More silence. "Okay, I know that. I don't need to come over."

"Maybe you don't need to, but I need you to." I could sense I wasn't getting anywhere with him. "I'm not good at this. You know that. But, give me credit for trying."

"Credit?" He laughed grimly. "Now I know why so many women shoot their husbands."

"Please, I've already been threatened with being shot once today."

"Who else threatened you?"

There was a note of concern in his voice. My hope meter crept up. "Your partner."

"Huh. She shoots everyone. She shot me."

"Yes, and I believe she'd do it again," I agreed. He sighed again. "Okay. I'm coming over."

He did come. He avoided my touch as he came over the sill. He refused my offer of a drink. He slouched into the living room and hovered, fists shoved in the pockets of his jeans. The silence hovered between us as thick as a brick wall.

Finally, I spoke, not having any idea what to say. "I understand why you brought Briggs down. Even though it was wrong, I understand what motivated--"

"It wasn't wrong," he said, hotly. "The guy was a lying, murdering bastard and he had to be stopped. Just because I stopped him a slightly less than ethical way, doesn't mean stopping him was wrong. Who are you to judge the rightness of this, anyway? You got your damned job back, didn't you?" He whirled away from me. "God, you're just like him. Either I don't do it right, or if I do, how I did it is wrong."

"Just like whom?"

He wouldn't look at me. "You know who."

"Fox?"

His shoulders twitched. "When we first started this you made all those speeches that I couldn't look for a daddy in you. I was glad because that's not what I wanted. I know you're my boss. I never forgot that you were my boss but I thought that here, in this place, in this relationship, I could be an equal partner. But, I'm--" he sucked in breath and let it out on a heavy sigh. "But, I'm not."

"You are," I protested before the full impact of his words could strike me, wound me.

He tossed a sneer over his shoulder. "Don't." He turned toward me, squaring his shoulders. "I can't do this anymore. I can't sleep with you, be with you, knowing I'll always be your subordinate, underling, toy, pet, whatever. It's really just one step from sitting across your desk from you, nodding like a good little yes-boy, to sitting at your feet with a collar that says 'My name is Fox, please return me to Walter S. Skinner'."

I never saw the blow coming. I was knocked breathless. "Is that the way I make you feel?"
He lowered his eyes. "You did today."

"I was angry. I--"

"I make you angry a lot." It wasn't a retort, it was a reluctant observation. He turned slowly and started for the door.

I moved in front of him. I may have teleported myself there. I'm not sure. But somehow, some way, I blocked his path. "No more, Fox. You can't keep walking out on me." I pulled myself to my full height, and looked down the scant inch between us. "If you go this time, you go."

He met my eyes, assessing my resolve, pursing those full lips. At last, he nodded. "Okay."

Relieved, I reached for him, drew him into my arms. Held him for one blessed, Heaven on earth moment. Then he pressed a kiss to my cheek, and pulled away.

"Goodbye," he whispered.

He went.

-THE END-
not sure why I was sent, unless it was as simple as I was Scully's partner and she was a guest speaker. It could have been something more convoluted like my A.D. wanted me out from underfoot. Very mysterious that the directive was on my desk on Monday morning after I walked out on him Friday night. I dunno ... it's an X-File.

So, I played nice Fibbie in Buffalo all week while the uniforms and the shields watched me warily. Scully didn't say much, either. That's no surprise. She hasn't had much to say to me since she found out Skinner and I were doing the two man tango. She wasn't rude, she wasn't glacially polite, she just wasn't anything. I missed her counsel, her conversation, hell, I just missed her.

The high point of the entire experience, if it could be called that, was running into General Hardy and watching Scully recoil as if something slimy had brushed against her. But the All-American Soldier Boy didn't seem too interested in her anymore. He was actually courting me. Maybe it was time to consider a change. I knew I couldn't continue to work at the Bureau, not after this. I promised to give him a call when I got back to D.C.

And now here was another weekend alone. Last weekend I let my rage burn up the days and my disappointment drown out the nights. A week post, I was only tired of the whole subject. Why did it ever have to be about anything more than sex? I knew what I was about when I tried to keep it on a physical level. Any bookmaker in the world would have made a relationship involving Fox William Mulder to be a dead cert -- emphasis on dead.

All right then, why did I let love into it? Because, damn it. I wanted more than 'just sex'. 'Just sex' came in so many easy, tawdry forms that I knew 'just sex' word for word, both forward and rewind. And it wasn't the curiosity or novelty of 'just sex' with a man, either. There were ways, places where I could have experimented anonymously. When it comes down to the final analysis, I wanted him, because I knew the person he was. I admired him. I ... respected him.

And therein lies the rub. I don't doubt he loved me. Walter S. Skinner could not have taken the steps, the risks... me without love. Here's a little known fact; the bulldog is a romantic. But his love wasn't enough for me.

I'm fairly certain my parents loved me -- or as close to love as their little cloned hearts could get -- but they never could manage respect. I never dated a woman who could look me in the eye, keeping a totally straight face, and say she respected me. No one has. I suppose I'm not the sort to engender that kind of response. Scully probably doesn't even respect me, and if she did, I'm pretty sure she doesn't anymore.

But, acknowledging all that, would I go back, just for love? No. He told me I couldn't, but more, I told myself I couldn't. This was a once in a lifetime relationship. So what if he didn't respect me? I was happy in my ignorance. Now that I've been given the vision of wisdom, I can't give it back.

And I'm alone.

Right.

But alone.

________

Saturday, early morning. Still dark. I was awake. And hating it. I got spoiled in his bed, and now my futon is too hard. It hurts my hip and shoulders. I suppose I could be flowery and say it's too empty, too, and hurts my heart. But I'm not the flowery sort.
Too much effort to get up and run. So I laid there, twisting, grunting, inwardly whining, trying to find a comfortable position. Nothing doing. I threw my pillow across the room with a heartfelt "Shit!" and flopped on my back to stare at the ceiling. Headlights in the street below my window momentarily illuminated the water stains above me and suddenly I realized that I could see Skinner's profile over my head. Almost haunting me.

I sat up, turned on a light and gave it study. No. Just my imagination. I turned off the light and tried to settle back and close my eyes again. That was worse. Now that I'd let him put a foot inside my thoughts he was muscling his way in and taking over. I could almost feel the way his eyes would burn my flesh when he looked at me. Without his glasses, his eyes had a fiery quality, especially when he was aroused.

With a groan, I rolled onto my side, trying not to think of him aroused. The image of him; naked, that incredible bulk of a body; toned and bronzed and muscled ... and his cock ... well, shit, I wasn't going to get anymore sleep after that. But, I'll be damned if I was going to jerk off to his memory. I struggled to get up and knelt in front of my television cabinet, prowling through well-used, all too familiar videos. I considered and discarded case after case. Okay, so I knew every canned whimper, groan and 'oh, baby, you're so good' by heart. It was better than thinking about sex with him. I pulled one out at random and put it in the VCR.

It was cued up to a sex scene. I never waste my time believing there is a plot. I just go to the dip and dive, and fast forward over all the laughable acting and cheesy production values. Almost immediately I was treated to silicone-enhanced, world weary bodies squirming and breathing hard while managing to maintain an expression that seemed to say, 'Gee, did I remember to turn off the iron?'

Since I had developed something of an erection, I began to stroke myself, still kneeling in front of the television. Before long, I realized I was more aware of the fact that a curtain rod in the background of the love scene was drooping lower than the male partner, and that I had somehow managed to get a callous on my thumb than I was of any sort of pleasurable sensation.

I gave up.

I turned off the VCR, got up, stumbled into the kitchen for a bottle of water, and emptied it in three desperate gulps. Came out, fed the fish and wandered, as much as possible, around my living room. Skinner's got a great condo. So much room to roll around in.

I grabbed my jacket, my keys and my shoes and left.

I don't know why I thought coming into the office would be a good idea. All that did was remind me of him, all of him, every moment with him, right up 'til the moment I realized he didn't respect me.

I sat there, doggedly plowing over my expense report, drinking lukewarm Coke when I saw her silhouette appear in the frosted glass of the door. Shit. I think neither of us really wanted to be in this office with the other one. I began to scrape my file together. Even being home and restless was better than this.

She came through the door and paused, keys still in hand. She looked at me. "On a Saturday, Mulder?"

"Buffalo expense report," I said, trying to smile.
"On a Saturday?" Her brows were in danger of becoming one with her hairline.

I shrugged. "It's due on Monday."

"Mulder, you've never turned in an expense report on time in your entire career."

I put my calculator back in my desk. "I'm turning over a new leaf."

A funny look came over her face. She looked faintly ill and at the same time, deeply saddened. "Have you talked to him?" she asked in that quiet voice she has that seems so innocuous but is so full of meaning.

"Him?" I was staring at my keys, suddenly unable to remember which one locked my desk. "Him who?"

"No, no." She came to the edge of my desk. "Don't pull that with me."

I looked up at her. "Yes. I have."

"And?"

"And nothing." I found the key and locked my drawers. "Does Security know you're down here? I'll have them swing by and check you periodically if you --"

"Mulder ..." She let her words trail away.

I made myself look at her. "It was a mistake, Scully. And it's over."

"The hell it is," she blurted out.

It was my turn to raise brows. "How many Hail Marys will that cost you, Dana Katherine?"

"You still love him." It wasn't a question. It was a fact with irrefutable proof.

I felt myself blush. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"You still love him," she repeated.

I looked at my watch, impatiently. "If you have a point, get to it. I'm going to be late for --"

"Mulder, you know me." The Scully scalpel voice. "You know I don't approve of this relationship on multiple levels."

I felt the discomfort burning me all over. "Scully...." I began, and knew I had no place to go. "We don't need to have this conversation. It's over."

"We do need to have this conversation," she insisted. She was starting to color a little, too. "Regardless of my moral beliefs or my professional ones, the fact remains that you do love him. And he loves you. And I ... and I ..." She let her little pink tongue dart over her lips. "...and I love you. You are my dearest, closest friend." It all came out in a rush. "I want you to be happy. I think he made you happy."

There was a fucking lump in my throat. Damn it, an episode of Friends just snuck up on me. "Scully," I began, when I was sure my voice wouldn't crack and totally humiliate me. "It doesn't matter how I feel about him. He doesn't respect me. I can't live with that."
"Doesn't respect you?" she repeated, dumbfounded. "Mulder, he adores you."

"That's my point, Scully," I said, impatiently. I fumbled around for my jacket. "He adores me, like a puppy. I don't want to be someone's pampered little pet. I want to be an equal partner. I will never be equal to him."

Scully stuck out a hand. "Welcome to the club, Mulder."

I brushed her away. "Oh, thank you very much." I shrugged on my jacket and inched past her toward the door.

"Mulder, do you respect me?"

I skidded to a stop, just short of a brick wall. "What? Yes, of course. What kind of stupid question is that?"

She cocked her head slightly, and considered me thoughtfully. "Stupid question?" she repeated.

"Okay," I conceded. "Poor choice of words."

"Do you consider me your equal?"

I nodded. "Absolutely."

Uh oh. She zeroed in on me, strafing me with questions. "Then why do you ditch me? Why do you take off half-cocked without telling me what's going on? Why do you drag me all over the countryside on your whim? Why do you always play big tough guy protecting poor little female? Why do YOU always kick the door down? Why didn't you get me a desk?"

"I got you a desk," I protested. "Why are we back on the desk?"

She dismissed that with a flick of a finger. "Mulder, listen to me. You do a lot of things to me that could be misinterpreted as demeaning or disrespectful, but I'm sure that wasn't your intent."

Damn it, now she was making sense. I shook my head. "But, this is different," I said, falling back on a twelve year old's logic.

"Oh, of course it is." She put her purse down on the corner of the desk and opened it, purposefully avoiding my expression while I collapsed and rebuilt my defenses.

"So, what am I supposed to do?" I asked, sardonically. "Get a tattoo?"

She put both hands up in a gesture that was half surrender and half finality. "Fine. Whatever."

I came across the room and dropped a conciliatory kiss to the top of her head. "Thank you for the advice, Abby. I'll see you Monday." I got back to the door, paused and looked back at her, forcing a grin. "And Scully? The next door is yours, I promise."

_____

Sunday afternoon. I'm exhausted. I'm angry. I'm... tidy. I couldn't sleep Saturday night, wrestling between my convictions and Scully's romantic notions. So... I cleaned. I'd like to think I'm fastidious by nature and at least pick up after myself. I'd like to think that, but I can't. I am, as my mother used to say, a clutter bug. If there wasn't a dress code at the Bureau and a damn good dry cleaner to help me meet it, I'd live in sweats and a coffee-stained tee shirt for the rest of my life, picking through stacks of files, newspapers and empty pizza boxes.
All right, maybe I'm exaggerating, but it's true that entire expeditions have been lost in my closets. I think I found their burial site. In my restlessness Saturday, I cleaned my closets. All of them. I alphabetized my porn. I put all my newsletters from the Lone Gunmen in chronological order. I paired my socks. I IRONED my shorts.

Standing in the middle of my living room, surveying all I had achieved I was reminded, again, of Skinner's spotless condo and the fact that I had never seen toothpaste smears or beard hairs in his bathroom sink. I had never seen a wet towel on his bathroom floor, a dirty cup in his sink, a paper out of place, a picture hang crooked. What I had seen was Skinner, glorious Skinner. Skinner in the shower, Skinner in the kitchen, Skinner on the sofa, making a pillow for me out of one of his rock-hard thighs.

Oh, man, that first day after that first night together. Chinese food, MSG and sodium be damned, ice cream right out of the carton, cartoons, war movies, a sports blooper video, silly word games, a little wrestling, a backrub and a nap curled up next to him. Nirvana and I didn't even know it.

Time to run again.

I ran just a bit too hard, a bit too far and I was zinging and stinging and just a little out of control. The water from the shower was turned up too high and too hot and was pelting me almost mercilessly. I stood under it, one hand on the wall for support, the other against my chest, where my heart was still pounding. Feelings were welling up in me until I could barely breathe. It wasn't about 'just sex', although I was so hard at that point I could probably drill a hole in the tile of my shower stall. What it was about was that I missed him. I missed everything about him; the sex, the affection, the bemused expressions, the warmth, the security, the trust.

Finally, I surrendered. I gave myself permission to at least achieve physical release, but I couldn't. I now wanted more than I could ever have with him. The knowledge of what I gave up for the sake of what I needed knocked me to my knees, and I knelt there, letting the water turn tepid and then cold, caught somewhere between coming and crying.

XXX

Another night alone. Last Friday night he was here, telling me I was just like that bastard who raised him. Last Friday night I was so overwhelmed by the rapid succession of events that his words truly meant little more than nursery rhymes to me. All I know is that when I looked up, he was gone.

I knew it was over. I accepted it. I made the rule, he understood it and accepted it. He left. I closed the door behind him. I didn't sleep all weekend.

By Sunday afternoon I knew I would not be able to see him, encounter him in a hallway, hear his voice, hear his name without betraying myself. I needed time to heal. I created a bogus assignment, volunteered our Hero Of the Day, Agent Scully, to speak at a symposium up in New York State, and decreed that, as her partner, Mulder had to go, too.

So every night I worked late, telling myself I was catching up on all that went on in my absence. Every day I accepted the congratulations and condolences of all the traitors who only days before had been saying they knew I was dirty all along. Every day I listened for word of him, and every night I missed him. But, I knew it was the right thing to do. Still do. I can't go back. Marines never retreat.

On this Friday night, I stayed in town late, working and having dinner, hoping to run into some acquaintance with whom I could stretch out the night. I did not, and reluctantly, I turned the key in my lock at nine-thirty. Too late to do anything else, too early, far too early to go to bed, especially
Scotch in hand, I settled in front of the television, looking for a game replay on one of the sports channels. I was reminded of the first day we spent together in this place. It was a foolishly spent, utterly wasted day, and I wouldn't take back a second of it. I wish I could remember every detail of it the way I could remember him asleep beside me in the middle of the movie. I don't remember the movie, but I remember the even way he breathed, the way his fingers twitched occasionally, the peaceful expression on his face. They always say people look younger when they sleep. Mulder doesn't. He just looks like Mulder, at rest.

Another thing I wish: I wish I had let him attempt waffles that morning. I think the memory of that might have sustained me the rest of my life.

But there were memories. Lots of good ones, and few bad ones stirred in for flavor. Dancing with him. Holding him against me, feeling his humming within my chest, feeling his fingertips brushing lightly over my shoulders and back. The animation in his eyes when he related experiences, the fire when he argued, the almost volcanic glow when aroused.

Oh, God, Mulder aroused. He had been emotionally (and probably physically) celibate for so long that when he finally let himself go every glance, touch, double entendre was a match to dry brush. He erupted. Anyone in his vicinity was incinerated by the sheer heat of him. After a few short months with him, I was nothing but a man-shaped pile of ash.

And now I was crumbling.

________

Saturday evening. Dinner remained, congealed on the plate, at no time appealing to me. Scotch supply was nearly depleted. My paperback had stayed open to the same page for an hour. I was so deeply sunk in my despair that I have no idea how long the buzzer clamored before I roused myself and pushed the speaker. "Skinner," I growled.

"Sir?"

Scully. Damn it, she's the last person I needed to see. She would only remind me of him. Well, right then everything reminded me of him, why should she be any different? I jabbed at the button. "Come up."

She did. It's always a shock to see her in jeans. I have, of course, but so rarely that it catches me by surprise. I am accustomed to her being Mulder's feminine counterpart, suitably dressed, perfectly coiffed, minimally but effectively made up. She looked like a teenager in her blue jeans, tee shirt, and naked face. "Agent," I said, forcing myself to remember who she was to me.

"Assistant Director Skinner," she responded politely and stepped inside as I gestured for her to come in.

"Would you like some coffee? A drink?"

"No, thank you, sir." She was hugging her bag to her body, self-consciously.

"Come in and sit down. What can I do for you?"

She took a seat, perching just at the edge. "At the risk of being insubordinate, you know what you can do for me."
I shook my head. "Agent Scully. You have made your disapproval on this matter quite clear. However, I don't believe your feelings are at risk any --"

She rolled her eyes at me! "You two are so much alike."

"What are you talking about?"

"He said almost exactly the same thing to me today --"

Something waked in me. "You saw him? Today?" How is he? Is he eating? Is he sleeping? Is he one tenth as miserable as I am?

"Yes," she answered impatiently. "At the office. He was --"

"He was at the office on a Saturday?"

She nodded. "Doing his expense report --"

"Mulder was doing his expense report BEFORE it is due?"

She narrowed her eyes at me. "If I could finish a sentence, sir," she said, pointedly. I settled back and indicated that she should continue.

"Sir, you need to talk to him," she stated baldly. "This must be resolved between you. It's not good for either of you."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I bristled. I didn't need that brat to survive. Right. Just like I didn't need air.

She gave me a look that made me feel she could see every vertebra in my spine right through my Marines sweatshirt. "Sir, I'm not blind. I could see that you had not touched your meal. My olfactory senses are exceptionally good, and I can tell you've been drinking. You're unhappy without him. He's unhappy without you."

I know I sounded pathetic, and hated it, but it still came out. "Do you think so?"

She almost smiled. "If I know Mulder, he hasn't eaten or slept for several days. He's probably run too hard, and banged his head against every wall of his apartment. He was extremely well-behaved during our trip to Buffalo, which means his mind and heart weren't there with us."

That was immaterial. "You said you saw him today. How did he ... look?"

She seemed satisfied by my interest. "Fine. But he was distracted and defensive and just the fact that he came into the office to work on an expense report proves after one night home, his apartment has gotten too small for him."

I was jealous, momentarily, of how well she knew him. But my jealousy faded into concern. "Do you think he'll be all right? Should you try to talk to him again?"

"No. You should."

I sighed to the carpet. "It's pointless, Agent Scully. I tried talking to him. He won't hear anything I have to say."

She shrugged dismissively. "Then you have to say it a little louder. He's never cared what people
thought of him. He's never expected nor demanded anyone's respect. He's just done his work and gone forward, never looking back. But you're different, sir."

She nearly lost me. I could remember a thousand jeering remarks made at Mulder's expense, some even to his face, and he took them all with his focused disinterest and kept going. But he wasn't disinterested in me. "Beg your pardon?"

"I said, you're different. You matter to him, not just as ... as a lover," she forced herself to say. "But, as a man, as his supervisor, and as a friend. You let him believe that you believed in him. And now ..." She stopped. She swallowed tightly, and glanced away. "He doesn't want to be your pet," she explained, staring at the blankness of my wall.

Pet. He used that word with me. Good God, could he think I saw him as a toy? Never. More like a life-preserver, tossed at me as I was going down for the third time.

Suddenly, she was up, clutching at her bag again, her face fiercely pink. "I've said too much. But I had to say something." She started to back away.

"I don't know that there is anything I could say that would convince him otherwise, Agent Scully," I said, regretfully, rising to walk her to the door.

She tilted that pink face up at me, and with a frown that looked far more mature than the ponytail and freckles, said, "With all due respect, sir, you're a bureaucrat. You'll figure out something."

It was finding the sunflower seeds from Mulder's secret stash in my bedside table the next day that changed my mind. Before I could fully formulate a speech I was in my car and driving back toward Alexandria.

I didn't bother to knock. I let myself in the way everyone let themselves into his apartment, I jimmed his lock. I don't know why he even bothers to lock the place anymore. "Mulder?"

He came around the corner a minute later, mouth open, eyes blazing. He was wet, and naked, and his eyes looked red-rimmed and weary. I knew Scully was right. He hadn't eaten or slept in days. And he was naked.

I tore my eyes away and turned into his kitchen. It was ... spotless. For a moment, I forgot where I was, and why.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" he rasped behind me.

I didn't dare turn around. At that moment, I would have nailed him against the refrigerator and issued statements later. "Get dressed," I said, gruffly. "I want to talk to you."

He stood there. I could feel the defiance pouring off him. "We've said what we had to say."

I turned, took him in, and pushed him against the wall instead. I held him at arm's length, hands against his shoulders, struggling to control my natural inclinations. "I said, get dressed. I want to talk to you. Is that clear?"

"Talk? I don't believe you've taught me that trick, yet, sir." He shoved back and moved away. "I do have sit and stay down pretty well. Oh, yeah, bend over and say 'ah'. That one I've got knocked."

Every word was calculated to cut, and they did. I didn't know whether I wanted to hit him or kiss
him. I went to his refrigerator and opened it. Empty. Except for a nearly mummified red rose.

I turned around and reached for his phone. "I am going to order some food. Do you want Thai or pizza?"

"I don't want --"

"Mulder, shut the fuck up."

He clamped his mouth shut.

"Now, go get dressed." I started dialing the number of the pizza place who gave him the refrigerator magnet.

"What do you think you're doing? You're the one who said --"

"I was wrong. Okay?" I barked an order to the hapless girl who answered the telephone and nearly banged the receiver into place. Impulsively, I reached for his shoulders and pulled him into an embrace. "Mulder, don't you get it? I love you. I may not do everything right, but that doesn't mean I don't try." His wet body felt so good in my arms I wanted to touch him, caress him, explore him, but he was remaining rigid in my hold, so I eased him away. "Please. Get dressed. Let's talk."

I don't know what he was doing but he did not re-emerge until the pizza had arrived. When he came out, he was in jeans that rode low on his hips. Nothing else. I know I stared. I know it made him self-conscious. I could see him struggling not to cross his arms over his chest. I held out a slice of pizza that he took grudgingly.

I began my speech. I still didn't know what I was going to say. I just took a deep breath and prayed I was the bureaucrat Scully thought I was. "I never did thank you for all you did for me."

His eyes narrowed. It was his only response.

"This week, I've had the chance to look it over from all sides, and I understand what motivated you."

"Even if I did do it wrong," he muttered.

"I'm not saying that. I was wrong to feel that way. I can't impart my values or beliefs on you. I have no right to try. I'm sorry."

He shook his head.

"What does that mean?"

"It means too little too late, Skinner. I need more than that."

"I know what you need. What you deserve. I do respect you, you know."

"Oh, yeah, you proved that today."

"What do you mean?"

He shrugged. "Breaking into my apartment, ordering me around, force-feeding me --"

"Oh, call the authorities, I wanted you to eat one meal this week."

"You see?"
"No, YOU see." I put my pizza down and leaned toward him. "Here are some irrefutable facts, Fox Mulder. I will always be your boss. We'll never get around that one. But more important than that, I love you. Loving you gives me certain rights. One of them is to take care of you if you need caring for. Shut up. That isn't treating you like a pet, that's treating you like someone valuable, someone who means the world to me."

He looked as if he was going to begin another argument. Desperately, I tried to head him off. "This is no different than the way you take care of Scully. You know she's fully capable of taking care of herself, but your natural inclination is to protect her, look after her, if you can. You mean no disrespect, and you certainly don't see her as a pet."

He rolled his eyes at me! "You two are so much alike." He shifted in his chair. "She used the same argument on me yesterday."

Bless her little heart. "And?"

"And nothing. Of course I respect her. I think she's a helluva woman."

"And I happen to think you're a helluva man, Fox." I reached out to touch his knee. He didn't flinch away. "I do love you. And that means if you're sick, sad, hurt, I'm going to take care of you, and I'd expect no less from you if the reverse were true. I will always want to care for you, you can't change that. You can either accept it or --" I cut myself off. "No, there is no 'or'. You will accept it. You're stuck with me, buddy boy."

"Bossy."

"Yeah, I am. It's my nature." I was totally unapologetic. "And you're exasperating, defiant and...and ..." I gave up. "Brilliant, funny, compassionate, generous, selfless and pretty damned sexy without a shirt on."

He put the pizza down. "So that's what this is about," he snarled.

"What are you talking about?"

"You're horny so you thought you'd come over and make nice. Fuck that, Skinner. Go home and introduce yourself to Mr. Hand."

For a moment, I was stunned at the venom in his words. Then, I had to admit I would have probably had the same reaction if the situation had been turned around. "Mulder, you're wrong. Yes, I want you. The fact that the first time I saw you all week you were naked didn't help. But, listen to me and believe me. If I could never touch you again, I would still love you. If I had to take cold showers every night to sleep next to you, I would. I would hate that, but I love you more."

There was a long -- painfully long -- moment of silence, while he absorbed, weighed and tested my words. He reached for his pizza, and examined it, while he examined my motives. He finally smiled. Well, a corner of his mouth turned up around his pizza. Then it flattened out. "It was the right thing to do, Skinner. The Bureau needs you."

Relief and victory made me daring and stupid, "So help me, Mulder, you pull out that Star Trek Zen again, I will pop you on the nose with a rolled up newspaper." I held my breath. Would he see that remark for the joke that it was, or would he be offended?

He grinned. "Kinky." He took another bite of pizza. "But, if I'm a good puppy, will I be rewarded with a bone?"
"Sure." I shrugged. "Unless you would prefer to bury one."

His head tipped back, and he howled. "Okay, okay, I give. Rule Number Nine. No more puppy jokes."

I got up and kissed him, hungrily. "Let's not do this again," I whispered against his mouth. "I really can't live without you anymore."

He pulled back and frowned at me. "But, couldn't we do it once a year? My apartment has never been so clean."

Once a year? That sounded like forever and ever. "I'll hire a service for you."

His fingers ran up the crotch of my jeans unexpectedly. "Speaking of service ...."

I whistled. "Here, boy."

He chuckled at me as he began to work my fly. "Rule Number Nine, Skinner, and I will make you pay. I will force you to watch Star Trek II 'til you're mumbling 'the good of the many' in your sleep."

He paused and looked at me seriously. "It was the good of the many. And, in this case, of the few. You once told me I could believe in you. I did. I do."

-THE END-

TITLE: Same Game: Part XIV - Double Drabble
NAME: Mik
E-MAIL: 
CATEGORY: SRA
RATING: NC-17. M/SK. This story contains slash i.e. m/m sex. So, if you don't like that type of thing - STOP NOW! Forewarned is forearmed. Proceed with caution.
SUMMARY: Is this how Howard Johnson got his start?
FEEDBACK: Feedback? Well, yes, if you insist ... Flames? Send 'em to my brother, he's having a barbecue.
TIMESPAN/SPOILER WARNING: This is an AU, very vague spoilers for multiple episodes, nothing current. Skinner has always been their boss. And I don't give a damn how many arms Krycek has, he doesn't get to play.
KEYWORDS: story slash angst Skinner Mulder NC-17
DISCLAIMER: Fox Mulder, Walter Skinner, Dana Scully and all other X-Files characters belong to Chris Carter, Ten-Thirteen Productions and 20th Century FOX Broadcasting. No copyright infringement is intended and no profit is being made from their use. I'd rather say that they really are mine, but I've been advised to deny everything.
This is for Geoffrey, who gave me permission to play with his characters from "What You Want", for the owners and shareholders of the Chatterers Gallery for their love, support and lifetime supply of "Peeps", and querida Susan, for her brilliant execution of all things beta. And Xanthe, welcome back. Isn't this where I came in? Thanks for opening the door.
If you like this, there's more at http://homepages.go.com/~frogdoggie/3wstop.html. If you didn't like it, come see me, anyway. Pet the dog.
"Careful, you're spilling."

"This is my kitchen. I can make any mess I want."

"I can't believe you have a waffle-maker, Mulder. You don't even have a can opener."

"I can't believe I do, either. I found it when I was cleaning out my closet. Will you hush? You're making me lose count."

"I think it was fourteen."

"You THINK?"

"You're the one with the photographic memory."

"Yeah, and you're the one with the big mouth."

"If you had a measuring cup you wouldn't have to be doing this by tablespoons."

"Yeah, and if I had an orange roof, I could be a Howard Johnson's."

"Baby, if you want waffles that bad, I'll take you to Howard Johnson's."

"Stop calling me baby. But don't stop that, that felt good. How many was that?"

"Three hundred and nineteen. Come on, I'll buy you waffles. I'll even have them put strawberries and whipped cream on them for you."

"You keep it up, bulldog, and you'll be having bread and water for breakfast. On the other hand ... if you keep that up you'll be having me for breakfast."

"Now THAT sounds good."

-THE END-
Same Game XV - Out of Bounds  
by Mik  

He sighed. I braced myself. I had been sleeping with Skinner long enough to recognize that sigh as a precursor to a shift in position. If I timed it just right, I could slip out from beneath his arm without disturbing him. 

A moment later, I was creeping downstairs, naked, dragging a hand over my eyes and stumbling into a chair, exhausted. Despite my normal routine of night terrors when on my own, it was unusual for me not to sleep when I was in his bed, but these nights I had a lot on my mind. 

Something had changed the definition of our domesticity in the last month. I'm not sure I could define it. I'm not sure I'd want to try. Since we had resolved our interpretation of one another's roles in this relationship, things seemed to have normalized somewhat. There was almost a 'Hi, honey, I'm home' routine to us, now. Let me state this right out: it was not a bad thing, in fact I enjoyed it, but it was different. But there were still boundaries I was unsure of, and there were still raw places that neither of us wanted touched. 

Work had managed to keep us apart a lot. When we could get together, it was 1) Say hello; 2) get naked; 3) eat and 4) sleep. Get up and repeat as necessary. Consequently, deep conversation did not fit into the equation. 

It wasn't our nature to 'chat' a lot, and quite frankly, we found we could go entire weekends emitting nothing more than inarticulate grunts and moans. When we did talk it was extremely superficial; sports, weather, the nudists who had moved into the condo across the pool from him, allowing us a great insight into female physiology. We had tacitly agreed not to discuss work. He was trying valiantly not to be my boss. Still...  

"Fox?"  

I sat up straight and looked around. 

He was at the bottom stair, shrugged into his bathrobe, blinking at me. "Can't sleep?" he asked, concerned. 

"Just restless." I tried to smile. But I know he had seen me hunched forward, head in my hands. Not exactly the pose of a happy man. "I get this way. You know that."  

His voice was a non-threatening murmur. "You want to talk about it?" But there was an anxious hopefulness in it. Or, perhaps an anxious dread. 

I shook my head. "Nah. I'll be back in a bit. Go on back to sleep. Sorry I woke you."
He took the few steps into the living room, 'til he could reach me. His fingers went through my hair, distractedly. "You've been restless a lot lately," he observed.

I reached up and held his hand against my head. "It will pass," I promised. "Go on to bed."

He didn't move, but he was quiet for a moment. "Getting bored?" he suggested softly.

I looked up with a jerk. "Where did that come from?"

His smile was rueful. "It's no secret that I'm a bit of a stick-in-the-mud, even for a gay relationship. Maybe especially for a gay relationship. I know that." His fingers shifted under mine, sending a little shiver down my neck. "You once described me perfectly; picket fences, pipe and slippers. I like things quiet and familiar. Even you."

"I know." I slid my hand over his lazily. "And I like it, too. It feels good ... safe."

"But, boring."

"No." I brought his hand to my mouth and kissed it. "You're a great lover and a good friend. I couldn't be bored with you." That I could say with conviction. "I just have a lot on my mind right now." I released his hand. "Go on. I'll be back soon."

He didn't move. "Is Scully all right?"

"Scully's fine. I'm fine." I stood up. "Come on, pipe and slippers." I wound my arm around his rock-hard middle and urged him toward the stairs. "I'll come back with you."

He stopped at the stairs and sighed. "Mulder, if you want out of this ..." He let it go.

I caught his chin with my free hand and met his eyes. "I do NOT want out of this. Skinner, this has been the best thing that ever happened to me. I never want out. You'd better not push me out. I'll stalk you or something."

He smiled against my hand. It didn't reach his eyes. "Fair enough. Let's go back to bed."

So I laid there, still, waiting to be sure he was asleep. I didn't know how to tell him.

A month ago, in Buffalo, miserable because I had called it off with Skinner, I didn't run when I ran into General Sean Hardy. Typical sociopath that he is, he knew exactly what to say to convince me that I needed to get away from the Bureau, without even knowing that I needed to get away from the Bureau. I endured his comments, telling myself I was only being polite, when in truth I was desperate for any option that would get me away from the truth I had given away with both hands. He suggested we get together for lunch when we were both back in D.C.

And, even though I resolved my issues with Skinner, I kept the lunch date with 'Sean'.

General Sean Hardy can be a smooth operator, despite the stupidity with which he attempted to handle Scully. One afternoon with him and it was clear to me that if he'd taken another tact, he might have gotten through to her.

He certainly got through to me. He invited me to a ritzy joint not too far from where I live, but way too far from the way I live. He knew the kind of beer I like in my dreams. He got my name right, this time. Then he said, 'I know you don't like to be addressed by your first name, however, I find calling you Agent Mulder just too formal for an informal lunch date.' An ingenuous smile. 'Would you be offended if I called you Mulder?' Very smooth.
And by the end of lunch, we were both laughing, having a little brandy with our coffee, and a couple of cigars I KNOW never saw the inside of Customs. They're not my usual vice, but hell, you don't get an opportunity like this every day, so I took it.

So there we were, a couple of men of the world, settled back in our sidewalk cafe chairs, Courvoisier brandy in one hand, hand-rolled Cubans in the other, when he leaned forward and touched my knee. 'You're wasted where you're at, Mulder.'

Skinner filled my coffee cup, and ruffled my hair as he left the table. "You know," I growled over the sport's page. "You only do that because you know I can't do it back."

"It looks like someone got up on the wrong side of bed --about three times," he observed, putting the pot back.

I flushed. I didn't know he noticed that I got up again. "I'm sorry if I disturbed you."

He wiped his hands on a towel and then straightened it. "Well, you did, but only because I'm worried about you."

I pretended not to notice, even though every time he does that he reminds me of that Julia Roberts movie 'Sleeping with the Enemy' and I wonder if one of these days I'd have to drown myself and let my hair grow out or something. "You fuss too much," I told him and turned a page.

"I resent the term 'fuss'," he said, returning to the table. "I prefer 'exercising due concern'."

"Well, you're exercising too much concern here. I'm just going through a phase. I do it periodically. I haven't had an X-File in weeks, and all these murders, kidnappings and robberies have gotten on my nerves. I sought his eyes over the edge of the paper and tried to grin. "I need a good animal mutilation or a haunting."

"I'll see what I can do," he said dryly.

The house phone rang. We looked at each other. I whistled, low. "Boy, you're good."

He cuffed me gently as he got up to answer it. I heard him laugh. I heard quiet murmuring, a soft expression of surprise. I heard him return. "No X-File," he said, leaning against the kitchen door. "How 'bout a Mets game?"

"Oh, no thanks. I'm full."

"Very funny. I have been presented with box seats to tomorrow's game. You want to fly up tonight and have dinner in New York and catch the game tomorrow?"

I turned and looked at him. "You're asking me on a weekend away? Gosh, what will I tell my folks?"

"That your lover has been given unbelievable seats to a pennant contending team," he returned, levelly. "And if you don't go, he's likely to pick up some cute barmaid."

"As long as he isn't picking up busboys." I turned another page. "The Mets do look good this year."

"So? Shall I tell him yes?"

"Yeah, sure. Wait a minute, tell who?"
"Sean. He has season tickets."

"S -- Sean? Hardy?" I wonder how quickly I can learn to drown?

"Yes." He made a vague gesture toward the past. "You met him at that press conference a couple of months ago." He paused and added, "He's the one you thought --"

"Yeah, I know who he is." Shit. I looked up at him again, frowning. "Do you really think it's smart for the two of us to go away for the weekend, where someone we know will see us?"

"Mulder, he invited both of us." Uh oh, he sounds patient, which means he's TRYING to be patient. I swallowed. "Why would he do that?"

Skinner scowled at me. "He knows about us, Mulder."

Yeah. No thanks to me. "He does?"

"It's okay. Sean's a very understanding person. And I can trust him. So can you."

I felt my jaw clench and I couldn't meet his eyes. You only THINK you can trust him, I thought, miserably. "Okay," I conceded. "If you think it's a good idea." Shit, shit, shit.

I don't know how Sean knew I was going to be in Kansas City, Missouri, before I did, but there was a message waiting for me at the front desk when we checked in, inviting me to dinner. I know I smiled. Scully didn't question it. She probably assumed the message was from Skinner. She never discussed it with me, but lately, she's been walking around with this smug look, as if she thinks she can take credit for Skinner and I resolving our differences.

Sean treated me to another one of those chaud maintenant meals and for dessert a bit of reminiscing about Walter that was sweeter to me than the creme brulee. He talked at length about Walter's loyalty to his friends, which was no surprise, and his passion and absolutely goofy devotion to his wife, which was. And more surprising, it actually stung. I never thought I'd resent Walter's love for Sharon, but I really hated hearing about it.

And in the middle of the reminiscing, Sean shifted tracks abruptly. "Walt thinks the world of you, Mulder."

I know I blushed and grew a stupid grin. "Well, he's a pretty cool guy." Oh, come ON, could we be a little more high school?

Sean offered me a cigar. "So, how long have you been with him?" he asked, reaching for a box of matches.

The question bothered me a little. Walter had no right revealing our relationship without discussing it with me. Still, they had been friends for years. Maybe Skinner just needed a sympathetic ear for all the grief I gave him. "Oh, just a few months," I answered, accepting Sean's offer. "It wasn't something either of us planned. It just sort of happened."

The minute the words were out of my mouth, I knew I'd made a mistake. Sean considered the ring on his cigar for a long while before he ventured, "I thought you'd worked for him longer than that."
"Uh ... yeah. Six years." Shit. I just outed us -- to the Pentagon!

Sean remained quiet for another minute. "I didn't know Walt was gay," he said finally.

I took my time answering. I clipped my cigar and let him light it for me. I struggled to retain some sense of dignity, even if I felt I was wearing a bright red nose and huge floppy shoes, while I crawled out of a little, tiny car. "I don't think he knew. As I said, it just sort of happened." I felt compelled to add, "It was a first for both of us." More awkward silence, before I began an almost desperate speech. "Sean, I don't really care about me, but, you won't say anything about --"

"I wouldn't do anything to hurt Walt," he said quickly. "He's been like a second brother to me. And he was always there for Ron, even at the worst times. And when Ron..." For the first time I saw Sean, not as the arrogant Soldier Boy but as a fragile human struggling with grief. "When Ron died, Walter came in and took care of everything so Mom and I wouldn't have to. I know it was hard for him, too. He loved Ron like a brother, but he spared us the pain of..." A tear decorated his cheek, brighter than any medal on his chest.

I understood. "How did he do it?"

"Shotgun."

"I'm sorry."

He straightened and brushed at his face impatiently. "Anyway, I'd never allow Walter to be harmed, by anything," he added. He met my eyes at last. "Is he happy?"

"Oh, I hope so," I answered with unexpected fervency.

Everything else grew out of that conversation and despite all our convictions about hurting Walter, we had taken steps that were going to disrupt his life at best.

_____

I could feel Skinner's eyes on me, concerned, as we waited for clearance to unbuckle our seat belts and deplane. Sean had sent a private plane to take us from Dulles to JFK. I had made some sardonic remark like, "Your tax dollars at work," and fallen silent for the duration. I knew this was a mistake. I didn't want Walter finding out this way, but Sean and I were bound to reveal ourselves in close proximity for the weekend.

As the lights in the cabin went off, and we climbed out of our seats, I sent Skinner a nervous smile.

In the boarding sleeve, I was startled to feel his fingers tangle with mine and hang on. The bulldog was holding my hand, practically in public! Shit, did I feel like a heel.

Sean met us at the end of the sleeve, with a hug for Skinner and then one for me. I hugged back without thinking, though Walter's grip on my hand made it awkward. When I released Sean, I looked up at Skinner and he smiled at me, in approval. I made myself smile back. We had to talk.

XXX

Something is bothering him. I don't need to be an ace profiler to see that. He's quiet and restless, getting up and wandering around the condo at night when he thinks I'm asleep.

I really thought things were better. He always seemed eager to get together with me. The sex has been phenomenal. The time we spend together has been easy and lazy and undemanding. And yet,
something's not right.

At first, I thought he was having problems with Scully, because he always seemed to be worse after a field assignment, but then I saw them together on a local case and it was patently clear that the Mulder/Scully chemistry was unpolluted.

I didn't know what to do for him. I tried waiting it out, I tried distracting him. I even tried asking him. He said it was a phase and the next morning he was his customary, cracking-wise self. But, something's still bothering him.

I knew he didn't want to spend one of our precious weekends with Sean Hardy but I find it hard to tell the kid no. I tried to make Mulder realize that this was just proof that he was going to be part of my life even when other parts of my life intruded. Sean had somehow discerned my extraordinary feelings for Mulder and graciously invited him along for the weekend.

At least, that's what I thought.

My first clue should have been when Mulder accepted Sean's embrace so naturally. (Well, natural for him.) Their greeting was casual and friendly. Mulder made an off-hand comment about seeing him out of uniform, making Sean laugh. Sean asked about a case, Mulder answered.

The picture came into focus that night, however. Coming out of the guest bath of Sean's apartment, I saw Sean lighting Mulder's cigar, and the easy smile Mulder gave him in thanks. Even then, I didn't catch the implications right away. My initial reaction was loud protest. My Mulder didn't smoke, not cigars, not anything. My Mulder was brash and juvenile and impulsive, but he didn't have any of the standard issue vices. What was he doing with one of Sean's smuggled Cubanas clenched between his teeth?

I stood there a moment, trying to reconcile myself to the idea that Mulder was smoking, and watched them lean against the balcony, talking and considering the skyline. They seemed so comfortable together, relaxed ... familiar. I felt a tightening around my chest, and a level of envy turning the edges of my vision green.

A song came on the radio and they reacted instantly, in unison, as if rehearsed; a finger-snapping, shuffle step dance, singing 'We built this city on rock and roll', a little of what Mulder refers to as 'air guitar'. I'd never seen this side of Mulder, although I've often suspected it existed, somewhere, buried beneath his neuroses and guilt. I think this was what Mulder could have been; as a big brother, as a best friend, as a young man with a normal childhood. Ending the song with a flourish, he laughed, and Sean put a hand on his chest, shaking his head, saying something I couldn't hear.

I moved toward the door and they both turned, moved away from each other, looked guilty. And I understood.

They both fussed over me that night, almost a competition to prove which one of them mattered to me more. Neither of them realized it was wasted effort. I was shell-shocked. My best friend's little brother had moved in on my lover. How could he do that? Hell, I helped raise the little punk. Who was there for him to turn to when Ron began his revolving door cycle through the VA system? Who came to clean up the mess when Ron took half his head off with an unlicensed shotgun? Who was it who got his mother into grief counseling and held his hand through some very rocky nights? And this is how he repays me? Takes the best thing that ever happened to me, and turns it into one more of his little 'acquisitions'? The bastard. Even though I smiled at him, even though I laughed at his nervous little jokes, I wanted to toss him off that twenty-second floor balcony.

Mulder was just pathetic. He never got more than five feet from me, and when he wasn't practically
wrestling Sean to refill my coffee or light my cigar, he was sitting near me, glumly, chewing on a fingernail, and sighing a lot.

But none of us mentioned what was going on. This is why we have wars, I realized. If we were three women, there would be hair and false fingernails all over the terrace, but the matter would be resolved. We three big, strong men sat there, trying to maintain, and ignoring the elephant in the living room.

Oh, I admit I added to the problem. I got very territorial, touching Mulder whenever he got near me, positioning myself to always be between the two. I think I tried very hard not to be aggressive, but at the same time, I didn't want either of them to think I was just going to roll over on this situation. Sean wasn't taking Mulder without a fight; Mulder wasn't going without protest.

Needless to say, it wasn't a late evening.

I came out of the bath and found Mulder sitting on the edge of the bed looking miserable. He didn't even look at me.

"You might have told me," I chided, trying so hard not to grab him and shake him and demand to know how he could do this to me.

"I didn't know how," he admitted, staring at the floor.

I didn't like the way he responded. It was full of inevitability. "Have you made up your mind?"

He nodded once. "Yeah, I think I have."

I waited. I wouldn't ask.

He remained silent.

I asked. "What are you going to do?"

He shifted uncomfortably. "I think I'm going to go."

Sucker punch to the solar plexus. I reeled. Yet, my pride kept me erect. "When?"

He shrugged. "I'm thinking in about six weeks."

"What are you waiting for?" I barely kept the sneer from my voice.

If he heard it, he ignored it. "I want to finish up some loose ends, I guess."

Well, that was flattering. "Loose ends --"

He met my eyes and the feeling there silenced me. "Please, Walt, could we just go to bed?"

Now I just felt slapped -- all right, slapped HARD. How many times had Sharon and I had that exact conversation? How many times had I stopped an in-depth examination of what was going on by telling her I just wanted to go to bed? Shit. No wonder she divorced me. I couldn't even speak to respond. I just gave him a jerky nod and began to undress.

The bed in Sean's guest room wasn't the king-size we were accustomed to so there was no way we could avoid one another. So we fell onto our backs and lay still, trying to pretend the other one wasn't there. I know he could feel the heat that poured over me. I was so enraged, I needed physical release. I wanted to punish something, someone. I needed to scream, howl, hit, hurt. Mostly I wanted
to hurt Sean for hurting me, but there was a need to punish Mulder, too. He needed to know that he couldn't just walk away from me without consequences.

That kind of thinking frightened me, and I shut my eyes, trying to will away the image of Sean's hand on Mulder's chest, the two of them laughing so ... so intimately. Mulder and I never laughed. Our conversations were so banal, so pointless. Mostly we had sex and argued. No wonder he was so easily wooed by Sean. A mind like Mulder's needs as much stimulation as his body, and Sean is a very intelligent young man.

Damn it, I lost Sharon because we never talked, and now I'm losing Mulder for the same reason. It's supposed to be different, easier with another man. This isn't supposed to happen --

Then, I felt it. His hand. On my chest. His fingernails dragging over my skin. His mouth on my shoulder. A part of me melted. I'm losing this, I realized, painfully. In six weeks, my pass expires and he'll be gone. A part of me wanted to brush him off, tell him to go now. The rest of me didn't listen.

His fingers meandered down my torso and danced lightly over the place where my leg joined, and his mouth moved up, over my shoulder to my throat. He was murmuring between kisses, soft, encouraging, almost crooning sounds. I almost felt he was trying to soothe me.

His mouth found mine. I didn't resist. Angry, even betrayed, I could not resist Mulder's kisses. His mouth is a separate entity, alive, aware. He licked his way into a kiss, sucking at my lips, nipping at my tongue. His body moved against mine, his fingers seeking, finding, stroking the center of my consciousness.

A few moments later, he pulled back, rolled away from me.

_____

Mulder was in the shower, so I climbed out of bed and dragged on clothes before leaving the bedroom. I wanted to be out of the room before he finished.

Sean was on the phone in the kitchen, at the same time, giving instructions to his housekeeper on the proper speed for whisking eggs. Once a general always a general, I suppose.

He gave me a little high sign as I went through, and concluded his call quickly. A moment later he was bringing me a Bloody Mary. "Morning, Walt," he said, tentatively.

I gave him a nod, and swished the celery stalk around my glass distractedly.

He gestured toward the terrace, and I followed him, having no place else to go, and unwilling to go back into the guest room and face Mulder.

We took chairs and sat, quietly, trying to appreciate the still air of early morning, which promised a thick, hot summer day to come.

It was clear there was something on Sean's mind. He opened and closed his mouth several times before I rescued him with a terse, "Fox told me, Sean."

He looked relieved, and then regretful. "I know it's hard on you, Walt. I never intended to hurt you. I didn't realize --"

"All that matters is what's best for Fox," I said roughly, cutting him off. I didn't want to hear the thin apologies meant to cover the depth of this wound.
"Fox has what's best for him," Mulder announced, coming through the glass doors. He paused at my chair, and kissed me. "'Morning, babe." He took a chair nearby and nodded when Sean offered him a Bloody Mary.

'Babe'? I looked at him. He looked unnaturally bright. He looked as if he was trying too hard. He looked as if he was avoiding my eyes. "How did you sleep?" I asked softly.

I heard Sean return behind me.

Mulder looked up and forced a smile. "Great. Always. Thanks, Sean." He pulled the celery out and licked the tomato juice away from its length, and I felt every stroke of his tongue on my cock. And I know he knew I did.

Sean didn't miss it, either. He drew up his chair and looked from one of us to the other. "Are you two okay with this?"

Mulder waved it away with a tolerant frown. "We're fine, Sean. Don't worry about it."

And the three big, strong men groped greedily for another topic, while the elephant trashed the living room.

Breakfast came, and we all raved about the meal, even though I doubt even Sean could remember what we were having. We talked about the Mets prospects, and Mulder rattled off statistics like a pro. I felt Sean's eyes darting to him in approval and wanted to point out that I taught Mulder the finer points of baseball.

Mulder surprised me, however. He smiled at Sean's admiration. "Don't be impressed. I just have a photographic memory. I don't know much about baseball, really, except what Walt taught me. I'm more into basketball." He flicked a look at me.

"Really?" Sean reached for the coffeepot and refilled our cups. "I suppose a tall guy like you plays a lot."

Mulder's eyes remained on me. "I play often enough. Walter keeps me on my game."

I thought back to a night in a small town in Tennessee when I took a man so brittle with guilt he could have snapped with a sneeze out for a little one on one, and came back with my whole life rearranged.

"You play, Walt?" Sean was looking at me.

I was jerked back to the moment. "A little." I shrugged. "Just to keep him loose."

Mulder snickered into his coffee. "He keeps me loose."

I sent him a discerning look. Mulder was putting on a show. But for whose benefit?

Much to my disappointment, from the airport, I took him back to his apartment. I had hoped we would have at least had a late supper or something before we parted company for the week. I should have suspected something like that when he insisted on taking everything to New York. He had no reason to come back to the condo. So, it caught me by surprise when, he turned to me and said, "Do you want to come up?" and there was a light of hope in his eyes.
I should have said no. I know that. I knew it then. But, six weeks is very short in the overall scheme of time, and I wanted every minute I could with him.

He let me in and left me in the hallway, puttering around in the kitchen. I closed the door and took his bag into the living room, noting that the tidiness he had been so proud of was now a distant memory. I wondered, somewhat caustically, if Sean would subject him to spot inspections.

A few moments later he appeared, with a glass of Scotch in each hand. "You want to stay the night?" he offered in what I would have to say was a silky purr.

I actually considered it. If I left at five ... I reached for one of the glasses. "Yes."

He took a sip from his glass. "Let's go to bed."

What is this, Mulder? A mercy fuck? I studied his face; open and in need. Well, hell, beggars can't be choosers, can they? I emptied mine in a gulp. "Yeah."

That entity known as Mulder's mouth went to work the moment we crossed the sill. He licked, he sucked, he bit, he kissed. And all the while, his fingers were working at buttons and zippers and waistbands. Within a couple of minutes, I was naked on the edge of his bed, and he was on his knees between mine, licking over my cock like an ice cream cone.

I contributed nothing to the entire procedure but the occasional grunt of approval, and to run my hands through his hair. He felt so good, and yet ...

Eventually, he stood and pushed me back on the bed. Then and only then did he begin to undress, slowly, with a teasing smile. The little prick was giving me a strip show. And I lay there and enjoyed it as he shimmied out of his jeans and let his shirt fall off his shoulders with a flirtatious shrug.

Naked, he climbed up over me, and straddled my hips, rocking his ass over my cock. Occasionally, he would swoop down for a kiss, and then went back to his rhythmic rocking.

Finally, I couldn't take it anymore. I caught his arms, and pushed, flipping him over, so that I could take the superior position. He opened his mouth in protest, but I cut him off with a kiss. "This is for you, baby," I told him.

He squirmed under me as my mouth moved downward. "Don't call me baby."

I bit his nipple. "Just making up for this morning."

He answered with a groan and arched against me.

I followed a route similar to the one he had taken with me, 'til I found his cock; upright, rigid and purple, and I took it into my mouth, whole. "W -- Walter," he gasped as I sucked, hard.

It had been a while since I'd had him in my mouth, and I had forgotten how good he tasted, the salty-bitterness of his pre-cum, the soft, warm eau de Mulder of his skin. I licked and slurped up and down his shaft, savoring his flavor, savoring the way he writhed and moaned under me, savoring him.

After a few moments, I urged his knees upward, released his cock long enough to suck my own thumb a moment, and worked that up inside him almost roughly, making him yelp. "Just making sure I'm keeping you loose," I explained with a chuckle and resumed my diligent work on his cock.

Between my mouth pumping up and down and my thumb pumping in and out it didn't take much longer. He shifted and trembled, and moaned and then his head tipped back and he let out a deep,
animal growl, as he flooded my mouth with his cum.

"Oh, God, Walter," he moaned, groping for me, and running one shaking hand over my scalp.

I let his cock slip out of my mouth, and eased my thumb from his ass, letting him roll onto his side, his knees still tucked up. "What about you?" he mumbled.

"Shhhh," I answered quietly, sadly. "This was about you, remember?" I settled behind him, holding him close, kissing his neck, his shoulder, his hair. I let him fall asleep, as he so often did post orgasm, my limp penis resting against his back.

-THE END-
or limp dick.

The worst thing about having a partner with ED is that there's nothing I can do. I mean, I know the things I would recommend if I was seeing him in private practice and he came to me for help. I know what a psychologist should say and do. But, as his partner, I just keep my mouth shut and pretend I don't notice that he can't get it up for me anymore.

Okay, no, there is something worse. There is the fact that, even though I have an intellectual understanding of what's happening to him, I'm still taking it personally. In my head, I know he's under tremendous stress professionally and privately, in my heart, I'm pissed off that when I snuggle up next to him naked, it doesn't seem to have the slightest effect. I've tried all my best tricks, and a couple I picked up on the Internet and the most I get from him is a kiss and a 'that's nice, Mulder'. NICE? Nice is not what I want it to be.

To be fair, he's been very attentive to me. Suddenly, he's ... talking to me. He touches me a lot. He holds me close when we sleep. He has been extremely generous in the area of oral sex. It should be a fucking dream come true; I've got the boss on his knees for ME. But, perversely (if you'll pardon the expression), the more mind-blowing the blow job, the greater my need to have him inside me.

It's gotten to the point where I don't want to initiate sex. I'd rather just have a good book.

And now he's looking at me.

I got in town early this morning, and he was there, ready to take me home. I had planned to go back to my place, and then pretend to oversleep, and miss that window of opportunity called the Sunday Afternoon Game, which was our excuse to get together should anyone be asking. But he found out I was on that red-eye, and he met me, picked up my bag without a word and took me back to his place.

I guess he wants to spend as much time as he can with me. He's even been inviting me over in the middle of the week when I'm in town. I keep telling myself it will be easier once I'm gone.

He let me sleep for a while, then woke me to one of his Sunday morning specials. Damn it, how come he knows how to make waffles? We watched the game together, and he gave me a killer backrub. I nearly fell asleep on his living room floor. We read the paper together, sprawled all over the carpet, and he told me about a meeting he'd attended earlier in the week. He's taken to imitating some of the other A.D.s and who knew the bulldog was such a canny mimic? He had me holding my sides, while he slurred and smacked his way through a speech by one of his colleagues.

Skinner's sense of humor is deep and dry, and far too rare for my liking. Getting him to laugh is like discovering a diamond just lying on the ground. You can't believe you found it, and it was so easy, but it isn't likely there's another one nearby.

I'm never sure what will elicit a laugh, however. Some of my 'humorous' remarks have resulted in a stern, 'Mulder'. Some very innocuous offhand statements have gotten that wonderful half smile of his, the one that shows the dimples, but not the teeth. When I think about it, some of the most intimate moments we've had recently involve laughter. I don't remember ever laughing with a woman. Not even Scully. In fact, I don't think Scully gets my humor. Or maybe she just doesn't laugh.

"Feel like a little red meat for dinner, Fox?"

I rolled over on my back and looked up. He was on his knees, gathering up the newspapers I had scattered around. Playtime was over. "You don't need to cook for me, Walt. I'll go home and get out
of your ..." I stopped. "... way."

He smiled at me, but the laughter was gone. "You're not in my hair, physically or metaphorically." He stood. "I thought I'd barbecue, if you're in the mood."

I rapped a fist against my chest. "Ooh, the caveman is back."

He gave me what I call his 'damn straight, Mulder' look. "Yes, and if you're a good boy, I'll club you and drag you back to my cave later."

"What for?" I wondered. I turned back onto my side to avoid his eyes, and said, "Hey, that sounds good."

He was still behind me. Not even the newspapers rustled in his hands. Finally, he asked, "Did you see Sean in Florida?"

"Why do we always have to talk about Sean?" I snarled inwardly. Outwardly, I said, "No. I haven't seen him since the Mets game."

"No?"

I fell back on my back and sought his eyes. "No."

"Mulder, there's no reason to feel guilty..."

"Good, because I don't." Not much.

"Fine." He was gone.

I sat up and looked around, wondering if I was making a mistake. Would things be ruined if I left? Did I want everything to stay the same? Ah, shit, I don't know.

I scrambled to my feet and found him in the pantry, feeding my shorts and socks to the dryer. "You know, I don't come over here so you'll do my laundry."

"I know," he said tersely, setting the timer and slamming the door. "But, it makes sense for you to do it while you're here. Otherwise you'll have to go to a laundry and stay there for a couple of hours. At least here, you can do other things while you're waiting."

"We HAVE a laundry room in my apartment building," I reminded him.

"Yeah, and I saw a rat there the last time I was down there."

"It was a mouse."

"Mice don't generally get over a foot tall, unless their name is Mickey," he retorted.

"Steroids."

He was almost ready to laugh again. Almost.

_____

After dinner we had a beer out on his terrace and watched the girl across the pool prance around her condo, naked, with all the windows open. We had decided there was no gravity in her unit. That was the only explanation for those boobs and that butt.
And we laughed some more.

"I think she's trying to get your attention, Walter," I observed. "You've got the only unit on this side of the pool with a terrace that faces hers."

"She's wasting her time," he said, and leaned over to grope my thigh.

I gaped at him. "She could see that! Are you out of your mind?"

"No. Just telling her how it is." He tipped his head back and emptied his beer.

"You're out of your mind," I told him. Still...

"How's Scully?" he asked a few minutes later.

"She hates Florida. We always end up wet and cold there."

"Mulder, it was one-oh-six in Miami yesterday. I saw that on the Weather Channel."

"Wait 'til you read our expense reports," I promised him. "The A/C in her room broke down, so I loaned her my room. We had a power surge that blew the fuses on my floor, so we were using candles to finish our report by and that set off the fire sprinklers and then --"

He put his hands in surrender. "Stop. I'll read it tomorrow. Is she mad?"

"As a wet cat." I snickered at the thought of a well drowned Scully, standing in the middle of my bed, sodden paperwork at her feet, her red hair plastered against her face, screaming at me not to just stand there but do something.

He was still chuckling. "Whose idea was it to use candles?"

"Well ..." I glanced away, trying not to laugh out loud. "She left her flashlight in the car, and the batteries were dead in mine."

"And ...?"

"Well, she had all these nice aromatherapy candles in her bathroom."

"So, it was yours."

"No, it was hers. That's what had her so pissed off."

We both laughed.

But at the first note of silence, he reached over and touched my thigh again. "How about an early night?"

I made myself look hopeful. "Sure."

He took the beer bottles and stood. "Why don't you take a quick shower so you won't have to get up so early in the morning?"

I nodded. I was seriously thinking about doing a little DIY sex just so that there would be no tell-tale erection to make him think that his attempts were welcome. Not that I didn't welcome his advances, I just hated the disappointment that came after. I'd just rather not.
I was halfway out of my jeans when he came to the bathroom door and looked at me. "Sean has tickets to the play-offs. He wants to know if we're interested."

Slight emphasis on the word 'we're'. Hmmm.

"Play-offs?" I looked at my watch. September. Where the hell had this year gone? And I had to turn in my resignation pretty soon. I could already hear the loud cheers coming from the seventh floor. I gave him a frank look. "How do you feel about that?"

"It's up to you," he answered blandly.

"No, it's not. You're the one who likes baseball, not me." I dropped the shorts and felt his eyes go over me. I resisted an urge to cover myself. "Let's put it this way; if you want to go, I'll be happy to go with you."

He nodded and backed out of the bathroom. Did that mean yes or no?

He was back a few moments later, pushing the door to the shower aside, and sending his eyes over my soapy body. "I missed you, you know."

I forced myself to smile. "I missed you, too."

"When was the last time we made love?"

"Well, last week before I left --"

"No, I mean, made love." He looked at me meaningfully.

I answered with a shake of my head and resumed the soap work.

"Will you make love to me tonight?"

I had only done that one time. I began to sense a little performance anxiety of my own. "Yeah. That sounds really good."

"I'll ... um ... get ready."

I blushed, I know I did. In the course of our growing understanding of homosexual sex, we had come to appreciate the value of the occasional enema. I always thought I was practical minded, and I thought that partnering with a doctor for so many years pretty much inured me to all bodily functions, but enemas still embarrassed me. And it embarrassed me more to think of him doing that for me. "Sure."

There was an odd expression on his face. As if he expected something more. I tried to analyze it but it's hard to be analytical, naked and soapy, with a guy staring at you. It wasn't until he turned away that I realized what it was. His expression said, 'You see how much I love you? I'll even do this for you.' Yes. Things had to get better.

Well, the sex was good that night. At least, it was good for me. Yet, despite some direct hits on his prostate, his noodle stayed as limp and loose as pasta boiled fifteen minutes too long. He didn't even try to fake it. He waited for me to disengage, and rolled over to take me in his arms and kiss me. "Good?"

I wasn't quite ready for articulation yet. All I could do was gasp and nod and try to say 'I'm sorry' over the pounding of my heart.
He kissed me again and said, "It's okay, Fox. It isn't you."

Well, shit. Does that mean when his missile does go into orbit it isn't me, either? I don't like the implications.

I didn't argue with him. I just let him pull me close to him, and fell asleep, listening to his slow, even, unlabored breathing.

___

Scully had apparently overcome her near drowning experience. She was at her desk, looking her usual poster-girl-for-perfection self when I came in. She put down her pen and gave me a quick once over. "You look like you got some rest this weekend. Is that a new tie?"

"Does one have something to do with the other?" I asked, shrugging out of my jacket.

"No. It's just that tie is almost sedate." She signed something with a flourish and closed a folder. "Well, that's one thing to be said for what's going on. He's been a good influence on your wardrobe."

"I resent that." I started rolling up my sleeves. "This tie was a gift from my mother."

"And you're wearing it?"

It took me a minute to see that impish glint in her eyes. Scully was actually teasing me.

"Yeah. Once a year, I bow to tradition."

"Is today the day?"

Her voice had changed. I looked at her. The impish glint was gone. She was asking me something else.

"Yeah." I pulled the envelope from my belly drawer. "I'm going to submit it after our conference this morning."

"How does he feel about it?"

"I'm not sure." I flipped the switch on my CD player and came to squat at her side. We were trying to be discrete these days. "He seems to be supportive. He's not happy about it, which surprised me, but he is trying very hard to show me that he's not taking it personally."

She had to lift her voice slightly to be heard over Queen, even with me at her side. "Are you sure this is the right thing to do?"

"Oh, yeah. No question. We'll never keep this working as long as he's my boss. He tries, but he's always going to be my boss. He's told me that. I'm doing this for him. And for you."

She looked taken aback. "Me? How did I figure into this equation?"

"Well, there are two points." I held up a finger. "The first one is you really disapprove of this. Now you won't have to see it." Another finger. "And the second one is you'll have a chance to further your career without me hanging around your neck like an albatross."

I swear tears shimmered in her eyes. "Oh, Mulder, you big... goof." She put her arms around my neck and hugged, tight. "You've never held me back." She brushed hair from my eyes. "What about you? What in this is good for you?"
I smiled at her. "I'll finally stand a little even at the bar with him. I won't be his subordinate. I'll be just ... not his subordinate."

"And this will make everything all right?"

I laughed at her. "You sound like my mother."

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, my Lord. What does your mother think of all this?"

I stopped laughing. "Well, she's happy I'm moving to the Pentagon. She's not happy about me sleeping with a man."

"No. I can't see her too happy about that." She frowned. "Was she too terrible?"

"Well, she gave me all the standard maternal pinpricks; your father will be spinning in his grave, I didn't raise you this way, how can you deny me grandchildren." My voice was in danger of breaking suddenly, so I stood and returned to my desk. I picked up the envelope. "Show time."

I admit I had a moment of doubt when, at the conclusion of our meeting, I stood and hesitated in front of his desk. Scully was already at the door, and she gave me a questioning glance as I pulled the envelope from my pocket.

He was still signing off on our expense reports and didn't look up. "Something else, Agent?" he asked gruffly. Boy, one thing Skinner never did was let the bedroom come into the boardroom, although he had been known to bring the boardroom home on occasion.

"Uh ... yes, sir." I looked at Scully again, and this time she nodded. "I guess this ... um ... makes it official."

He looked up as I put the envelope on his desk. For a moment, it seemed as if he was afraid of that bit of processed tree product. Finally, he reached for it, and slit it open with a thumbnail. He scanned it once, then read it again slowly. Then he looked at me. "Are you sure about this, Agent?"

I nodded. I looked at Scully a third time. "Yes, sir."

"And, when does this take effect?" He looked at the letter again. "October first." He sighed. "I suppose I should have expected this, but it does take me by surprise." He slipped it back into place and put it into a drawer. "Thank you, Agents."

I stood there. Surprise? How could it be a surprise? He'd known about this for three weeks. I looked at Scully yet again. Her brows had literally disappeared into her hair. I looked at him. He looked normal; the only indication that anything was wrong was a vein pulsing at his neck. Holy shit! "Uh ... sir ..."

"That will be all, Agent Mulder," he answered crisply. "I'll see that this gets processed." He made that neck twitch thing he does.

"Sir," I persisted. "That is only a resignation from the Bureau."

"Yes, I'm aware of what it is." He opened a file.

"Sir. I'm not resigning from anything else."

"Thank you." He looked up. Looked at Scully. Looked back at me, and then it clicked. "Thank you," he repeated.
There it was, in front of me. His resignation. Neatly typed and on company letterhead, all protocols recognized. I was not only losing him, the Bureau was losing him. How could he do this? How could he be so stupid? This was his career. How could he give up his career for another man? I suppose the same way I could give up mine for him, if it came to that.

I would have given anything to scream at him, right there in front of Scully, not as superior to subordinate but man to man, lover to lover. But I sucked it up, reigned it in, trying to focus on something else; his expense report, that God-awful tie he was wearing, the way Scully hovered at the door.

"Sir?" he said, tentatively.

Not now, not here, I implored silently. I picked up a file, tried to look purposeful while the last piece of structure in my life crumpled. "That will be all, Agent Mulder."

His voice was very soft, I had to strain to be sure I was hearing correctly. "I'm only resigning from the Bureau."

Only? Wasn't that enough? Wasn't Sean satisfied with just taking him from me? "Yes, thank you." I felt like a jealous woman. I was worse. I was a jealous man. And when I got my hands on that little punk, I was going to show him how it felt to have your heart ripped out through your eyes.

I felt Scully shift impatiently from the door.

"Sir, I'm not resigning from anything else."

"Thank you," I repeated and then ... I looked at him. I looked at Scully -- she was nodding. I looked at him.

It was so slow to ignite but the relief rushed through me like a back draft fire. It took every ounce of control in my body not to leap over my desk and pull him into an embrace, smother him with kisses and maybe even tears of relief. I wasn't losing him, he wasn't leaving me, Sean didn't win. "Thank you," I said again, and hoped he could hear the genuine gratitude in my voice. I won.

Mulder's expression was bewildered, and maybe even hurt, but I chose to focus on the positive. He was only resigning from the Bureau, not from me. I ... WON.

They left then, and I sat, staring at the place where he had been, still seeing him that night on the terrace with Sean; the easy laughter, the dancing, the smiles. Did I misinterpret what I saw? I must have. But the conversations we'd had certainly led me to believe ...

I stopped and began to analyze each conversation and realized we never once said anything definitive. Tears stung my eyes. Three weeks of pure hell because, once again, the great stone Skinner did not talk about his feelings.

I reached for the phone, vowing that this would never happen again. I wanted to hear him tell me. And I wanted him to hear me.

"Mulder."

"Agent, I have a question about this letter you just gave me."

"Sir, I thought I made it clear --"
"Not here." I hung up. I stood up. I collected my suit coat from the closet and left the office and the building and, hopefully, my own masculine stupidity.

I didn't wait too long at the bench on the far side of the reflecting pool. He trotted up to me, still looking bewildered, and now defensive, and maybe a bit angry. "Yes?" he snapped out, slowing before me.

"I need an answer."

I could see his wheels start spinning as he mentally flipped through case files. Mulder was back on the job, the letter and all its implications forgotten. There are times, albeit brief, where I doubt there's a human male functioning beneath that trench coat. He just always seems to be 'on'. "For?" he prompted, bracing himself.

"Are you having an affair with Sean Hardy?"

This didn't catch him by surprise. Evidently, he'd thought about it. "No," he answered evenly.

"Were you?"

"No."

I drew a deep breath and measured my words carefully. "So, when you told me you were going to leave, you meant the Bureau."

"Yes."

I nodded. Yes. I was an idiot. Twice bitten by my own ego. "Thank you." My anger added an unnecessary sharpness to the additional, "That will be all."

"THAT will be all?" he repeated. His voice had risen and he softened it as a curious tourist turned our way. "You have the balls to ask me if I'm having an affair with anyone, much less your friend, and then say, that will be all? This isn't my expense report we're discussing Mr. A.D., Sir. This is my integrity. How dare you?"

Well, I have said more foolish things in my life, but none come to mind. I wanted to reach him, explain my fear, my jealousy, my sense of loss. I couldn't, so, I did what any man would do. I got defensive. "It was a reasonable assumption."

"Reasonable?" He spat the word. "What was reasonable about thinking that I could ..." he fumbled for a moment, looking around us. "... cheat on you?"

"You've been seeing a lot of him."

He wouldn't look at me. His color was very high. His lips were pursed together, as if struggling to keep words in.

I had to confess that I'd investigated this. "He's been following you on a lot of field assignments."

"Yeah. He's been recruiting me."

"You seem very friendly with him."

He turned, caught my eye from the corner of his. "He's your friend, Walter," he said quietly. "You told me he's an important part of your life. I was trying to get along with him."
It was a miracle I remained standing after that blow. I did the only thing I could do out in public. I reached out and squeezed his shoulder. "Will you accept my apology?"

He nodded and shrugged my hand away. "I wouldn't cheat on you, Walter," he said flatly. "You can say I'm a lot of miserable things, but I'm not a cheat."

"I know," I agreed quietly, just beginning to understand how much I had managed to hurt him once again. I started to walk and waited for him to fall in step beside me. "I saw you with him that night and I stopped thinking. All I could understand was that I might lose you." If I had said those words to Sharon, would she still be with me? Would she still be alive? I dragged in air and swallowed. Don't look back. You have a good thing here, be satisfied with it.

My thoughts must have been scrolling over my face like java script because he nudged me. "Don't second guess yourself, Walter. You'll paralyze yourself."

I nodded jerkily. "Are you coming over tonight? I have one or two things I'd like to make up to you."

For the first time he addressed it. He looked off across the pool to the scaffolding around the Washington Monument. "Walt, have you been to a doctor?"

I nodded. One of the most humiliating conversations I'd ever had with a physician, but I have no regrets. It was the smart thing to do. "Everything checks out."

"So, it's probably just ... us."

I nodded again.

He was quiet for a moment. "I'll come over, but we'll play the rest by ear, okay?"

____

Sometimes I have to believe that Mulder missed his calling as a therapist. I know he is beyond parallel as a behavioral profiler, but there is a streak of gentle compassion that would serve him well in practice. That night he showed me that compassion.

For a long while after dinner, we did nothing but kiss and caress each other's bodies, avoiding our genitals. We explored and tasted one another from lips to legs and many parts in between. I began to feel that familiar ache in my groin but he ignored the sluggish response and continued to pet and kiss and touch. Finally, he rolled onto his back, and began to stroke himself. "Can you get an erection when you do this?" he asked, not looking at me.

I pulled up to kneel beside him and watched his hand work his erection easily, with loving familiarity I had come to appreciate in our sexual contact. "No," I admitted, at last. "But I do have orgasm."

"Yeah?" He smiled up at me. "Touch yourself for me, Walt," he coaxed. "I want to watch you."

I felt very self conscious, those moss green eyes darting over me, touching my eyes, sliding over my chest, and then to my hands, where I grasped myself reluctantly.

"Oh, yeah," he murmured, and tightened his own grip slightly. "That's good."

I closed my eyes, gathered my balls in my other hand and began to find a rhythm, losing myself in the memory of his touch. I felt the bed shift, and when I opened my eyes, he was kneeling in front of me, matching me pull for pull, his eyes fixed on my face.
He leaned into me, letting our lips meet, and our hands brush against each other. His eyes never left mine, fixed and settling deep within me, so that my touch was almost his. I felt as if he was making love to me by remote control. The sensation was overwhelmingly intense and intimate. I'd never known this with Sharon, with anyone. "Fox," I whispered against his mouth.

"Yes," he murmured, a hint of urgency in his voice. "Yes."

I never did get hard, but I came hard, spurting over my hands, over his chest, his chin, and he watched it with the expression of a delighted child, until his own orgasm caught up with him, and he baptized me with his own sticky flood.

I laughed. I couldn't help it. I gathered him against me, ignoring the mess, ignoring his squirming protest, and I kissed him hard. "Thank you."

He buried his face in my neck. "You're very welcome."

"In case you have any doubt about it, I love you."

He pulled back from my embrace. "What about you? Do you still doubt how I feel about you?"

I shook my head, helplessly. "I'm an idiot. I know it. But, I've got a good thing in my life, and I don't know how to deal with it. I've had a lousy track record with relationships. I messed up my marriage. I never expected to have another relationship, Mulder. And I'm ..." I looked down at my cum covered hands.

He nodded. "I know. It's scary, isn't it?"

"I'm sorry, Mulder. For everything."

He surprised me with a grin. "Hey, it's kinda' flattering, you know. The bulldog ready to fight over his bone." He stopped grinning. "You would have fought, wouldn't you?"

"Babe, I was ready to kill him with my bare hands," I confessed.

"Do you think Sean has any idea?"

"No, and he'd better never get any idea," I warned.

"Not from me," he promised. He swooped in for a quick kiss. "Come on, Bulldog, let's take a shower."

And that night, he slept in my arms, and I knew he was there to stay.

-THE END-

TITLE: Same Game: Part XVII - Air Ball
NAME: Mik
E-MAIL:
CATEGORY: SRA
RATING: NC-17. M/SK. This story contains slash i.e. m/m sex. So, if you don't like that type of thing - STOP NOW! Forewarned is forearmed. Proceed with caution.
"Fox Mulder played with G. I. Joe?"

I jerked around, guilt putting my heart in my throat even some twenty-five years later. Seeing him with the box in his hands, I gave him a goofy grin. "Ah, you found my secret stash."

"Secret?" He glanced up into my father's nearly empty closet and then back to me, a brow cocked in curiosity.

I put the soapy rag down in the bucket and came to pull the box from his hands. Considering the plastic figurines and weapons, I felt a wave of nostalgia and then its companion unease. One of the worst beatings I ever got came after my dad caught me playing war with my illicit treasures. Yet he never did destroy them, as he vowed he would. They remained hidden in the cupboard of the summerhouse for a quarter of a century.

Something must have registered in my face because Skinner touched my shoulder and repeated gently, "Secret?"

"Yeah." I put the box on the trash pile very deliberately. "My dad was ... weird. He was very pro Establishment but very anti-military. He told me repeatedly he didn't raise me to be cannon fodder. War toys were expressly forbidden unless they were board games, requiring tactics and quick thinking, like Battleship or Stratego --" The word choked me slightly. Suddenly I could hear the wounded cry of an animal, rising in pitch until it was a young girl's voice, calling out, 'Help me, Fox.'

I dragged a hand across my eyes. "It's hot up here. Let's call it quits and get back to the hotel and the A/C."

"Come on, you wimp," he challenged, taking another tour of the closet. "We're nearly done in here."

I gave him a quick look. He had worked incredibly hard all day, and was red-faced and perspiring profusely. I know why he wouldn't quit. He felt he needed to prove he was a man. From where I stood, there was no doubting he was a man; bulging thighs barely contained in faded jeans, incredible guns exposed by a sleeveless tee shirt, and I have to admit, I liked that bandanna roped around his head. He looked sticky, dirty and very, very ... hot.
Another shock for me. I got turned on by this he-man look. I suppose it makes sense, if you're going to be attracted to a man, the manlier the better. This one was all man, even if his manhood continued to be reticent.

I picked up the bucket of soap and water and carried it to the bathroom to dump. "It's too hot," I persisted, just short of a whine. "You saw all the storm watch flags along the cape when we went to lunch. Let's get back to the hotel before it hits. I don't relish being trapped in a car with you if visibility drops to zero in a gale. I don't know if you've gotten downwind of yourself in the last couple of hours but you are getting a bit rank. If it blows through, we'll come back and finish tomorrow." I passed by him and dropped a kiss to his frowning mouth.

At least I tried. He jerked away from me as if I was unclean on Yom Kippur. "Come on, Walt," I complained. "Just a fucking kiss."

I shouldn't have said that. I know it. I have been trying so hard not to be judgmental or demanding, to be compassionate and consistent, just like we learned in Sexual Dysfunction 101. But I can't always remember my training, damn it. Sometimes instinct kicks in.

He tugged his headband free and mopped at his face. "Yeah, let's get back to the hotel. It's too hot to breathe. And you're not exactly a posy patch, yourself."

We packed up in silence. I was angry and I knew he could hear it in the way I slammed doors and threw things. I'm not sure still if I was angry at him or at myself. On one level, our relationship had never been so good. We talked. I mean, really talked. He opened up a couple of tightly sealed bags and spilled them for me, shaking them so that all the bits and pieces of his failed marriage and lost friends were scattered before me for my scrutiny. I've never had any trouble talking to anyone - anything; if so inclined, a tree would make a good partner. But I said meaningful things to him. I told him -- really told him -- about Samantha's disappearance. I revealed my true feelings for Scully. I told him about a disastrous affair I had in college in England. It was amazing and cathartic, and even though I still feel a bit naked because of the things he knows, I'm glad he knows.

But on another level ... I guess perhaps the significant level of this relationship, was sinking rapidly. I had originally surmised that his flag remained at half staff because he had presumed a little hanky-panky with General Sean, (which still royally pisses me off), but the situation didn't improve once he was assured that was not the case ... unless he's still not convinced.

To that end, I've been very careful not to see much of Sean. I spend all my days trying to tie up loose ends at the Bureau, and all my nights trying to convince Skinner that everything's okay. I've seen Hardy maybe twice; once to ask him to push back my start date a couple of weeks to let me finish a case Scully and I were assisting on, and once when Skinner invited him to dinner and then watched us both, as if looking for some sign of a hot and heavy romance. He didn't see any.

I flicked him a glance as we climbed into the car. He looked like he could eat two-penny nails. I decided to stay out of his way for the rest of the evening.

At the hotel, I let him take a shower first, not even offering to get in with him. We'd had a lot of fun in showers; a lot of slippery, soapy sex and a couple of just tender post coitus moments that I wouldn't trade for a peek inside the hangars in Area 51. But I don't get in the shower with him these days. I don't want to see him just hanging there, I don't want him to see me not hanging there.

He came out, wrapped in a towel and paused at the foot of the bed, where I had collapsed. "I left some hot water, if you want it," he announced.

I opened my eyes and looked up at him. Shit, look at those eyes. They're like dark flames that heat
something inside me. I groped for his hand. "Thanks." I didn't know what else to say, but I wanted to --needed to say something. "How are you feeling?" Not profound but heartfelt.

His eyes narrowed slightly, and then went slowly over me, taking inventory of things he hadn't needed or wanted in a while. "Fine." I felt his fingers squeeze mine. "You?"

Horny as hell. No, wrong thing to say. "Hot and tired." I used his grip on my hand to pull myself upward. "I'll go take my shower. Why don't you think about what you want to eat?" I stumbled wearily into the bathroom, already feeling myself stiffening with a need I hadn't met in about four days.

The water felt good; hot as promised, and pounding on my weary shoulders and back. I fumbled around and found the tiny bottle of shampoo he had left basically undisturbed, tipped my head back to get my hair good and wet, and began working up a lather. Shampoo dripping into my eyes, I sought the microscopic bar of soap and started working up another sort of lather.

I was just getting into it, falling back on a recent fantasy; Skinner's thick cock dueling with mine, his body pinning mine, his mouth possessing mine, his fingers locked in battle with mine, when I felt a hand on mine. I opened my eyes with a jerk and found him standing there, shower curtain pushed aside, holding my hand still. I started to get red all over. "I... uh ... I..." I gave up.

"Save that for me," he said quietly.

I felt a little fire of hope race through me. "Oh?"

"Yeah." He reached past me and turned the water off. "I decided what I wanted to eat."

I swallowed. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." There was a dark glimmer in his eye. "You."

"Okay."

I let him hand me a towel, and then, stepping out of the shower, I let him help me towel off. He was diligent about making sure I was dry, especially between my legs. He even knelt and very thoroughly examined me for moisture. Any he found was removed with his tongue, even the moisture leaking from the tip of my painfully hard cock. Oh, it had been so long since he'd touched me like this ...

I was beyond trembling at that point. I was full on shaking with need. I wanted him, and I didn't care how I got him. I'd do whatever he wanted, whatever he needed, just so long as we connected somehow. He levered himself up from his knees and kissed me, leaning his body against mine, pressing me back against the clammy tiles of the wall. I didn't care. I barely felt it. What I did feel was a warmth with the beginning of shape against my hip. I opened my eyes and searched his eyes.

"Let's go to bed," he said huskily.

I was almost afraid to move. I didn't want to endanger this fragile moment. But he was pushing at me and I turned and staggered out into the bedroom. He kept pushing me 'til I landed on the bed with a grunt, and he was on top of me, kissing, pinching, stroking, squeezing.

I met him kiss for kiss, stroke for stroke. There was some life in my Frankenstein monster and I was going to nurture it any way I could.
He was gone when I woke in the morning. I wasn't really surprised. I think I almost expected it when I rolled away from him the night before. He had teased and tortured me 'til I was ready to fuck a goat for him and then when I thought he was going to finally do what we both wanted him to do, he gave me a sad look and pulled away. He didn't say a word. He just put his back to me and went silent.

I wanted to scream at him. I think I wanted to hit him. If you aren't going to do anything don't tease me that way! How could you get me all worked up and not follow through!

Then I wanted to scream at myself. How could I be so stupid? So ... whatever I was that turned him off? How could I let things progress when we both knew he wasn't going to finish? I can't believe how slutty and dirty I felt laying there, feeling his weight on the bed behind me, and that painfully unrelieved cock in front of me. I finally got up, got back in the shower and finished what I had started. I know he was awake when I came back to bed, but he didn't say anything and for the first time in all the months we had been together, we slept without touching each other.

I've been hurt enough times; and not just physically. My psyche has taken plenty of abuse, but I honestly think there have only been two other times in my life when I felt as lost and alone as I felt that morning. There was a night when I was thirteen, and it really came home to me that my parents were never going to forgive me for losing Samantha -- that they felt they lost both children that night. And there was the morning I came home to find my apartment totally trashed -- knowing I had missed my chance to face with deadly force the people who had killed Scully, and I hadn't saved Scully either.

And now I knew Skinner had given up on me, on us.

I think I even thought about crying. I mean, who was there to see, after all? This thing was insane. Why did I ever let myself get involved with anyone, much less him? I mean ... a man, for Heaven's sake. And THAT man. I had experienced more incredible lows in the last five months than I had in all the rest of my miserable existence. Yet, I'd also experienced more incredible highs. Was that the deal? You had to have a running start to hit these highs, so you needed to start from a low? Who wrote these rules, anyway? Who said you had to deal with so much bitterness for a taste of the sweet? That's bullshit. You should be allowed to flounder around and be miserable until you find that right one, and then everything should be smooth sailing after that.

Well, if nothing else, I've learned my lesson. Fox Mulder doesn't get a love life. He doesn't get that happily ever after. Rule number ten: Fox should know better.

I was kicking the blankets back when I heard a key in the lock. I turned toward the door, paralyzed -- by fear, shock, dread ... hope. He came around the door and put his weight on it to shut it. He looked windblown and wet. I hadn't even noticed the howling of the wind outside, or the crash of rain against the window.

His eyes came to me and registered surprise. "You're awake."

"You're back." Stupid, I know, but I was still stunned and --and relieved.

"Yeah. I thought I'd better get breakfast while I could. It's really blowing out there." He brought styrofoam cups and a white paper bag to the bed table, and began unpacking.

I scooted up in bed 'til I could lean back against the headboard, dragging the sheets up to keep myself covered. I don't know where this sudden sense of modesty came from, but I was intensely shy about revealing any more of myself to him. "What's on the menu?" I asked, forcing myself to keep my voice light.
"The only thing open." He put an enormous cinnamon roll in my hands.

"Cool," I said politely. Well, no, there was enthusiasm in the mix. It isn't everyday someone brings you a piping hot cinnamon roll the size of Nebraska. I licked icing from my fingers.

His eyes tracked the motion. A frown furrowed up his brow. "Fox, about last --"

"It's okay," I lied. I didn't want to talk about it. I didn't want to put a name on it, having it laying out there between us. Because once we named it, shared it, owned it, it became ours -- not his. And if it became ours ... it could happen to me. That was it. I am so shallow that my fear is greater than my compassion for him. "You were tired. We worked hard yesterday." I took a large bite of the roll as if that would prevent any further conversation.

"You worked just as hard as I did," he pointed out. "I just want you to understand that --"

"Walt." I put sticky fingers on his wrist. "I do understand. We don't need to make a big deal out of it. That's part of the problem. We're working too hard at it. Makes it worse. Let's just let it go for a while. When it's right, we'll be ready."

He looked down at my hand, and the expression on his face was enough to make me cry. "You don't understand, Fox. You don't understand how frightening this is."

"I do understand," I interjected. "Everything about a man's sense of self stems from his penis. We can't help it. It's the way we're built."

His mouth twisted and he looked up. "No, that's not it at all," he said, sounding faintly disgusted. "This happens. It's a part of life. What's frightening, is that I might lose you over this."

It took me a minute. I'm not kidding. Sixty seconds of deadly silence while the meaning of his words settled into my thick skull. And when I did fully comprehend his fear, I was at a loss for words to reassure him. All I could think of were Scully's words a few weeks before. "You big ... goof." I was reduced to a five year old on the playground. I slugged his shoulder. "How could you think that your plumbing is the only thing keeping me here? My God, Skinner, if it was about sex, I'd have been with a guy years ago, or had a lot more women than I've had. This is about you ... and me," I conceded. "How we fit. How we fill in the gaps for one another. And I don't mean sexually."

"Mulder."

I looked at him. "Yeah?"

He kissed me. Hard, almost desperate. He backed away from me and reached for his coffee. His hand was shaking. I guess that was his way of saying 'Thank you'. Works for me.

Cold fingers tripping down my neck. The stench of the afterworld, the stark stare of disbelief on Scully's face. This was what I lived for. This was my work. I almost grinned at her. I'd seen enough unexplained horror and lived to tell the tale that instinctive fear had not surfaced yet, and I was reveling to be in the presence of what appeared to be a genuine haunting.

A brand new apartment building in Atlanta, Georgia, built on the site of a plane crash. Uninhabited. Sixteen units and not one of them had been rented. The owners couldn't even keep a manager in the place. The complaints began with construction workers when the drywall went up. Sounds of roaring engines filling the skeletal rooms, making the flimsy dividers tremble, crack and disintegrate. Howls and screams of terror in hallways. Plumbing that leaked red liquid, and small fires erupting
smelling of fuel.

Scully maintained it was sabotage; the new owners of the property had invoked a little used ordinance and purchased the site at a ridiculously low price in the wake of the disaster. I felt we had a genuine haunting on our hands. She had argued with me all the way, showing the pending court orders from the heirs of the victims trying to block the construction. Well, I just showed her the specter of a six year old girl, screaming in horror. Tiffany Tole, the only victim killed on the ground.

Of course, in the morning, Scully would claim it was an optical illusion, a reflection of a street lamp on the white walls. But tonight, she was touched, and frightened. And no street lamp in the world could have recreated the plaintive cry of a little girl wanting her mother in the final seconds of her life.

Don't get me wrong. I wasn't thrilled to have seen that. In fact, it hurt. What did thrill me was being on the road, on a real X File. My swan song with the Bureau was going to be memorable and meaningful. And Scully was here to witness it. Skinner had made it official when he signed our 302 that morning. "The last one, Agent Mulder. From here on out, administrative duties only."

I had to shake myself out of a momentary melancholy and trot after the vanishing image of Tiffany.

"Mulder," Scully protested. "Where are you going?"

"This way, unit 202. As near as I can tell from the project map, this is where her bedroom was. I think most of the activity stems from this unit."

"So, you think all of this is Tiffany?"

"Yes. I think we're reliving the last few minutes of her life; the sounds she heard, the sensation of the house falling apart, the smells, the heat ... everything Tiffany saw, felt, tasted, we're seeing."

"And what do you think is in Unit 202?" One of the few times I heard genuine dread in Scully's voice.

We never found out. They say the blast knocked us back nearly a hundred feet.

"Are you out of your mind?" He was absolutely wide-eyed with disbelief.

"Probably," I agreed evenly, trying not to laugh at his expression. "But I'm serious about my offer."

He rubbed at the white gauze around his brow. "I must have hit my head harder than I thought. I could have sworn you asked me to move in with you?"

"You hit your head plenty hard, but I did ask you. You can't get around with a broken arm, Mulder, not when you're right-handed."

"Skinner, did you hit YOUR head? OPR would have you for dinner."

I shrugged at him. "Based on what? You're not my subordinate any longer. You're out on disability until long after your resignation takes effect." He was scowling, and I know the irritation crept into my voice. "I'm not asking you to pick out furniture with me, Mulder. Just stay with me until you regain the use of your dominant hand."

"It's a very nice offer, Skinner, but ..." He stopped, the fingers of his left hand worrying at the straps
of his sling.

"But?"

"How's Scully?"

I barely reined in my exasperation. Mulder was changing subjects to avoid answering my question. "Scully's fine. She was smart enough to be thrown into a stack of corrugated boxes and foam packing."

"Yeah, she's a clever girl, our Scully."

"Mulder, what's the problem? Why don't you want to let me help until your arm is healed?"

He avoided my eyes, and suddenly I didn't need to hear the answer. He didn't want to be there with me, every night, dealing with the awkwardness of our less than satisfactory love-life. It would be impossible to avoid me, living in my house. I reached past him and gathered up his coat and other belongings. "Come on."

He sat there, looking at me.

"I have a hotel room. It's a lot cheaper than spending the night in a hospital. The Bureau can't say anything about that." I went to the door and opened it with a jerk.

He slid down from the exam table and just for a moment, his legs were wobbly. I almost thought maybe he should be spending the night in the hospital. Then he straightened, gave me a wobbly smile and murmured, "Ta da."

Scully was downstairs, in sickly green scrubs since the worst damage to her had been the destruction of her suit. She had butterfly sutures on her chin, and her hair was a greasy, streaky mess, but other than that she looked healthy, whole and shaken. She twisted toward us as we came out of the elevator and asked a thousand questions with her eyes.

Mulder came to her, caressed her shoulder in that possessive, pointless manner of his. She said something to him and considered the wrist protruding from the sling. Then she turned to me. "Sir?"

"I'm at the Embassy Suites," I said, herding them both toward the pneumatic doors at the end of the corridor. "Plenty of beds for everyone."

"What about the case?" Mulder argued.

I shook my head. "We'll have additional agents in the morning, Mulder. We can discuss it then. Come on. It's late and you've both been injured."

"Oh, sir," Scully began. "I'm fine."

"Bed, Agent," I said gruffly. I glanced over her head at Mulder who was looking everywhere but at me.

At the hotel, there was a brief albeit awkward moment, trying to decide who would sleep where. The choices were a king-sized bed in the bedroom and a double pull-out in the sitting room. Scully, blushing and stammering, insisted on the pull-out and pushed us toward the bedroom. "Just, please," she whispered to Mulder. "Not too loud." Then she shut the door and left us.

And there we were, alone in a hotel room, a bed before us in silent mockery. Although my ability to
keep up with his ever-raging hormones had been debilitated by age, stress and fear of loss, my desire for him had never wavered. That, however, was not enough for him, and consequently, on the rare occasion that he had been in town, we had been avoiding one another's bed.

Mulder swallowed and shrugged off the overcoat that he'd had draped over his shoulders like a cape. "I ... uh ... could use a shower," he said.

"How are you going to take a shower with that cast on your arm?" I challenged, roughly.

He looked down at his arm. "I don't know. I'll figure it out." He moved toward the bathroom door.

I stopped him. "Don't."

He flipped me a startled look.

"Don't shut me out, Mulder."

"I'm not," he insisted quickly. "I'm ... not." He surprised me then, turning into my arms, his free hand working up around my neck. "I'm not. Walt, I just don't ... I don't know what to do. I don't want to hurt you but I ..." He pulled away. "Never mind."

"What?" I tried to grab for him but he was already out of my reach. He shut the door to the bathroom behind him. I waited to hear him flip the lock, but he didn't. I went to the edge of the bed and waited. 'I don't want to hurt you but ...' What was the 'but'? What was coming? Oh, I already knew. I don't want to hurt you but I can't take this anymore? I don't want to hurt you but I need more than you're giving me? I don't want to hurt you but I want a whole man? Just what I'd been expecting. I'm grateful he didn't have the heart to finish the sentence.

I heard the water come on. I heard the shower curtain go back. I heard him slip and curse. Without thinking, I jumped up and pushed the door open.

He was standing beside the shower, rubbing his head. "I guess I can't do it by myself," he admitted ruefully.

"I'll help you --"

The door pushed open again, hitting me in the back. "Mulder, I heard --"

I turned and looked down at her. She was blushing. She had acted on instinct and even she knew she shouldn't be there. "I ... heard him ..."

"He's fine. He didn't realize how much he needed both arms for balance." I turned her out the door gently. "I've got things under control, Agent. Go on to bed."

Waiting until I heard her shut the bedroom door behind her, I turned to him. He was leaning against the bathroom wall, his head cocked to one side. "You have it all under control?" he said.

"This part of it." I pointed at the tub. "Sit."

I held his arm and helped him down into the tub. I got a towel and wound it around his cast and rested it on the edge of the tub. Setting the temperature of the water, I began to run the shower-head over him and then knelt at the edge of the tub.

He was silent as I took my time shampooing his hair. He always surprised me with his thick, soft hair. I liked it the way it was now, just a bit longer than that spiky, geeky look he'd sported recently.
After I rinsed his hair, I took soap and worked it across his shoulders and over his chest. It was comforting to see him naked, and be certain he'd added no new scars to his collection. He sat there as I let my hands slide over his hard skin, his head tipped back, his eyes closed. I could feel tension easing out of him as I worked over his muscles.

Then I worked my way down to his groin. His cock was already stiffening and actually jerked up at my first touch. He said nothing as I ran soapy fingers up and down his shaft. He hadn't let me touch him this way in a while. Everything had been focused on whether or not I was going to get it up, and when it would become obvious I wasn't, he would remove himself. It felt good to touch him, it warmed me, hell, it heated parts of me. Impulsively, I kissed him. "Feels good, baby," I whispered against his lips.

He opened his eyes and I'm not sure if it was the shower, or if there were tears in his eyes. He tried to frown. "Will you please stop calling me baby?"

I smiled at him, and pinched his glans. "No." I felt the smile drain from my face. "You don't want to hurt me, but ..." I prompted.

He reached down, at last, and stilled my hand. "It's not important."

"It is," I snapped. "If you're going to leave me because --"

"Leave you?" His eyes popped open, round and incredulous. "Who said anything about leaving you?"

"You did, you said --"

"No." He turned his head, avoiding my eyes.

"Mulder." I caught his chin and turned his face to me. "Fox."

"It isn't you, it's me."

"What do you mean?"

"I can't ... I hate the ..." He swallowed. "I hate being rejected."

"I'm not rejecting YOU." I stared at him. "Good God, I am NOT rejecting you."

"When you can't ..." His eyes flickered over me. "When you don't, when you pull away ... it feels like rejection." He sighed, hard. "Look, I know what's going on. I've studied sexual dysfunction. It's part and parcel with my professional expertise. I understand it ... in here." He tapped his forehead. "But, when it happens between us..." He shrugged, helplessly. "I can't help it. I take it personally."

"So, you've been pulling away first," I concluded.

He looked up at me, mortified. "Have I?"

I reached in and gathered him against me. "Oh, God, Mulder, I never even thought how it must feel to you." I kissed his wet hair. "I'm not rejecting you. Never. I've told you this before, and I still mean it: even if we never made love again ... I still couldn't reject you."

He squirmed like a cat. "Walt, you're getting soaked. Let go."

I backed away, only a fraction, suddenly afraid he could elude me in that narrow tub stall. "Fox, let me make this very, VERY clear. What's going on ... there are a million reasons for it. As you said,
you understand it. You know the factors that cause it; stress, fatigue, age. I work hard. I'm in a
difficult relationship -- one which I am not willing to opt out of. I think it can work itself out, but only
if I can be sure you're going to be there with me. You're the only reason I'd care if it worked itself
out."

"I am?"

He sounded almost childlike. I couldn't help it. I smiled indulgently. "You'd better believe it, baby. In
here." I tapped my forehead. "I want to make you scream."

He smirked at me. "If anyone could ..."

"Come on." I stood up. "Come to bed. Let me at least make you whimper a little."

________

"Mulder?" I put the keys and my briefcase on the foyer table, flicked a quick glance at the mail piled
there and went into the living room. Well, it wasn't much of a mess today. He was trying. "Mulder?"
I checked the kitchen. Something was in the oven. Lasagna. I think from the freezer section of the
grocery, but at least I wasn't cooking tonight. And he'd made an attempt to wash dishes.

I pulled a beer from the fridge, noting that there was a new six pack of Sam Adams. Evidently,
Mulder had been shopping today. Made a nice change from spending the day watching soaps and
talk shows as he had been doing for the last week.

Hard to believe I'd had him here a week already. I'd had such great plans. I was going to make him
scream some how, some way, some place in this condo. But all I had managed to do was come home
late, grumble about the mess and barely undo the damage in time to coax him into bed to sleep.

He had been petulant and difficult. When shattered fuselage had been found in the fiery remains of
the complex in Atlanta, he had crowed, proving it was a haunting. Numbers on the cockpit door,
however, traced the wreckage to a plane that had been recently taken out of service and had been
slated for scrap. The Toles eventually confessed.

I started up the stairs. "Mulder?" I started toward the bedroom, starting to be concerned, but heard a
sound from the den. He was in the dark, in front of the computer, in nothing but a pair of denim cut-
offs. Even in the dark he looked flushed, sweaty. "Mulder, are you all right?"

He looked up at me, his eyes slightly glazed. "Walt, have you ever heard of slash fiction?"

"Sounds right up your alley. What is it, serial killers?" I offered him the beer.

He shook his head as he took a sip and handed it back. "It's a form of fan fiction. You know, about
television and movie characters?"

"Oh, yeah, that's gone on for years. Even Shakespeare was, in his own way, writing fan fiction." I
tugged at my tie. Looking at Mulder in nothing but a pair of shorts was making me feel flushed and
sweaty.

"Shakespeare never wrote anything like this." Mulder flicked a hand toward the screen. "Slash
fiction is where the fans write scenarios pairing the males with the males or the females with the
females."

"You mean ..." I swallowed and tried to sound matter of fact. "Gay erotica."

"Yeah. Star Trek seems to be the favorite. You once told me you thought Janeway was a babe. I
found a story pairing her with Uhura from TOS." He scrolled the pages. "This stuff's pretty hot. Spock and Kirk, Starsky and Hutch, Simon and Simon -- of course, that's both slash and incest, but there are some major kinks out there. The ones I think are really kinky are the ones from Law and Order ..." He grinned at me, knowing that was one of my favorite shows.

I leaned over his chair, to nuzzle his neck. "What are you reading about now?" I scanned the screen. "Mulder, I don't think that's physiologically possible."

He chuckled at me. "Whatsamotta U? You don't think Moose and Squirrel could do it? What amazes me is how Rocky tops Bullwinkle."

"Mulder, I've always known you were sick, but this ..."

"Come on ... haven't you always wondered why Boris and Natasha hate them so much? That's some serious transference and denial going on there. Kinda' gives a whole new meaning to the Fractured Fairy Tales, doesn't it?"

"Come on, Rocky, I think your lasagna's burning." I tugged at his arm.

He came up and into my arms, six feet plus of hot, sweaty hard skin flavored with Mulder's particular scent. He was aroused. If thinking about cartoon characters could do this to him ... impulsively, I pushed him against the wall, and began sucking on his neck, pinching his nipples with one hand, pressing the cold beer bottle to his chest with the other.

He let out an almost unearthly sound of pleasure, and began tearing at my shirt.

In another moment, he was naked and my shirt was gone and my slacks were around my ankles. I had him hard against the wall, grinding my body against his erection. I wasn't hard but I didn't care. It felt good. He felt good. His entire body had become an erogenous zone. Everywhere I touched made him twitch and moan. His mouth was fixed on mine like a leech and it would have taken a nuclear holocaust at that moment to pry us apart.

We had one, between us. He jerked and groaned, stiffening, snapping his head back until it banged against the wall. I felt the hot flood between our writhing bodies and I wanted to cry in my relief. It had been so damned long. "Yes," I sighed. "Yes."

For a moment, we just stood there, letting waves of aftershocks ripple over us. Then I felt him shake beneath me. I opened my eyes. He was laughing. "Was it good for you, Moose?" he cackled.

"You are an asshole," I told him, prying myself away from the sticky mess. "An incredibly sexy asshole."

He reached for the box of tissues on my desk. "I'll take that as a compliment."

"You should." I took a wad of them from his hand and began to wipe at my stomach and thighs.

"Hey, I'm gonna' write my own slash fiction and post it," he announced, groping for his cut-offs. "I've been inspired."

I picked up my tie. "Oh? Who?"

"Tom Slick and Super Chicken."

I shuddered and started for the door. I stopped and turned back. "Just so we're clear on this ... which one is which?"
He grinned at me. "You knew the job was dangerous when you took it."

"I am NOT going to be Super Chicken."

That destroyed him. He dropped onto the chair, laughing helplessly. I had never seen him so happy before. Never. To see that open, happy, carefree joy on his face again, I just might rent a chicken costume and seduce him. Might.

He wiped tears from his eyes. "Whatever you say, Moose."

"Stop that."

"Yes, Moose."

I dropped the clothes and came back to the chair, caught his hair and forced his head back. "Now, listen to me."

"Another rule, Moose?" He was still laughing.

"Yes." I released his hair and stroked his cheek. "Remember that I love you. You know that, don't you?"

He stopped laughing. His expression was soft. "Yeah. I know that." He sighed, satisfied. "I know that."

-THE END-

TITLE: Same Game: Part XVIII - Double Team
NAME: Mik
E-MAIL:
CATEGORY: SRA
RATING: NC-17. M/SK. This story contains slash i.e. m/m sex. So, if you don't like that type of thing - STOP NOW! Forewarned is forearmed. Proceed with caution.
SUMMARY: Two against one isn't fair ... to the two.
FEEDBACK: Feedback? Well, yes, if you insist ... Flames? Send 'em to my brother, he's having a barbecue.
TIMESPAN/SPOILER WARNING: This is an AU, very vague spoilers for multiple episodes, nothing current. Skinner has always been their boss. And I don't give a damn how many arms Krycek has, he doesn't get to play.
KEYWORDS: story slash angst Skinner Mulder NC-17
DISCLAIMER: Fox Mulder, Walter Skinner, Dana Scully and all other X-Files characters belong to Chris Carter, Ten-Thirteen Productions and 20th Century FOX Broadcasting. No copyright infringement is intended and no profit is being made from their use. I'd rather say that they really are mine, but I've been advised to deny everything.
If you like this, there's more at http://www.squidge.org/3wstop/. If you didn't like it, come see me, anyway. Pet the dog.

Same Game XVIII - Double Team
by Mik
Well, for the third night in a week, I'd managed to roll over and smack myself in the face with my cast, and I let out another howl of protest, jerked awake by the shock of plaster encountering cheek.

Almost in the same instant that conscious thought told me there should be pain following such an encounter, there was the conscious thought that I had to stop hollering. I would wake my partner.

Partner. Hell of a note, huh? It was just this week, staying in his house, listening to him bitch about my messy habits and lousy cooking that I really felt like a ... oh, what do you call it? A couple? Yeah. Up to this point, our relationship had been pretty much defined by sex and some weird emotional addiction. Suddenly, I found myself in something just short of marriage. And here's the REAL X-File ... I kinda' liked it.

I know, months ago, I had warned him against trying to domesticate me, trying to make me into a pipe and slippers clone. I'd pretty much told him if he had stars in his eyes about growing old together he could get rid of them double quick. Now ... of course, my housekeeping and cooking, or lack thereof, was enough to give anyone second thoughts about living with me on a full time basis ... but the appeal was starting to reveal itself to me.

It was nice to go to bed with him and read or watch television, or just generally relax, and not feel that my sole purpose for being in that bed was to light rockets and break sound barriers. Granted, rockets were rare, but shit ... when I managed to get one lit ... I think the whole Eastern Seaboard knew about it.

For years, my concept of a partner was that they came in small packages, with red hair, blue eyes and an incredulous frown. This was the Jumbo Economy Size. Less hair, brown eyes, incredible, albeit rare, smile. I was starting to think I didn't want to go home.

At that moment, however, my thoughts were about waking my partner. Only to realize a moment later that my partner wasn't there, not next to me, not within easy reach for a pat, a caress, a reassuring gesture. I sat up, and looked around the semi-dark room. It wasn't dawn yet. Why was he up?

Mind spinning with a hundred scenarios, each more horrific than the last, I scrambled out of bed, checked the bathroom, the hall, the den, the stairwell. It wasn't until I hit the bottom stair that I heard a soft, small murmur, his voice striving to be quiet. I came around the corner, into the living room, and found him, in his robe, on the sofa, phone in hand, making notes in his Day Timer, in that concise hand of his.

He looked up at me. "Did I wake you?" he mouthed.

I shook my head, padded over to the sofa and looked over his shoulder to see what he was writing. "What the hell's in Mercedes, Texas?"

"Your partner," he answered softly, paused, measured his words and amended, "ex-partner." He listened a moment longer and said, aloud, "Thank you." He put the phone down. "Want to go to Texas with me?"

"What?" I repeated stupidly. It was a perfectly reasonable question. He hadn't asked me to drink cat blood or dance Swan Lake in matching tutus (would that be twotwos?). He just wanted me to go to Texas with him.

He squinted up at me. "Hit yourself again?"

"Yeah. Why are you going to Texas?"
He reached up, tilted my chin to get a better look, stroked his thumb tenderly over my cheekbone. "You're going to have a black eye this time, Mulder."

I brushed his hand away. "Why are you going to Texas?"

He frowned. "Scully's in the hospital," he began.

I didn't wait for the rest. I was gut punched, winded. I sank down to shaky knees. "H-how bad?"

How can you be so calm, you bastard?

He was actually smiling at me. "It depends."

I swallowed. "On?" I asked, full of dread.

"How much ice cream she gets to eat. She was felled with tonsillitis and the attending thought she ought to have them out."

It took a moment to sink in. My first response was an idiotic grin of relief and then a snicker. And then an outright, helpless laugh. "Our good doctor has never had her TONSILS out?" I sagged against the sofa, laughing. "She will NEVER hear the end of this one."

I stopped laughing. "Wait a minute. If it's just tonsils, why do you have to go to Texas?"

He frowned slightly. "She has some information she considers too delicate to fax and it needs to be in my hands right away. Given the fact that she's an adult, her recovery time might be a bit longer than a child's and she doesn't want anything to delay this information being acted upon."

A chill rippled over my spine. What was Scully doing collecting such delicate information ... and without a partner? "What kind of information?"

His frown deepened. "It's Bureau business, Mulder, and you don't --"

"Don't give me that shit," I snapped. "I work for the Pentagon now." I touched my chest with my casted hand. "I'm sacred, for God's sake."

"We'll discuss it on the way." He stood, hitching his robe together. "Come on. Throw on some jeans and come with me. It will do her good to see you."

********************************************************************************

The flight out was weird. The cabin was practically empty. Skinner seemed determined to fill the pressurized air with inane chatter, something out of character for him. In fact, he seemed almost driven to keep me from asking a single question about Scully, her condition or the nature of the information she was collecting. I was in a cold sweat by the time the damned plane touched down. We landed in Weslaco and had to hire a car to drive to Mercedes, a tiny town near the Mexican border.

I sat, fidgeting, in the passenger seat as we barreled down the two lane blacktop in the unexpected heat of a late October morning. I just knew Skinner wasn't telling me the truth about Scully. I was in a state of panic as we pulled up in front of a small, one story white building. "What's this?" I demanded, turning to Skinner.

He consulted his Day Timer and then peered out at the building. "The Mercedes Medical Center, I think."
"You're kidding, right?" We had to get Scully home. She wasn't going to let some backwater butcher touch her here. "I've seen bigger outhouses."

"Don't brag, Mulder." Skinner pushed his door open. "Come on, let's go."

Some of my anxiety dissolved when we stepped inside. It was clean. It was cool. There was a very competent looking young woman at the desk who didn't even blink when Skinner flashed his badge. "Miss Scully? She's in room 104." She pointed around a corner.

Scully was in her own clothes, sitting in a chair by a window when we came in. It didn't even really look like a hospital room. There were fresh flowers in a jar on the table, and the bed looked better than some I'd slept on in hotels over the years.

The best part, to me, was the way those bright blue eyes got even brighter as she saw us. "Partner!" she whispered.

"Hey, G-Woman." I came to her side and kissed her cheek. She did seem a little warm. "What's all this about you needing your tonsils yanked?"

"Don't start on me, Mulder," she warned in that voiceless voice. "How's your arm?" She looked me over again. "You finally had enough of him, huh, sir?"

Skinner raised a brow at her.

"Oh, that ..." He smiled faintly and moved around the room. "I've been tying him up and beating him nightly. I don't know ..." He shrugged. "He seems to like it."

Scully giggled softly. "Don't make me laugh," she implored. "Hurts."

"So ... when do you go under the knife?" I asked, trying to keep my voice light.

"This afternoon," she answered. "They had me scheduled for this morning but I wanted to see Assistant Director Skinner first."

"Don't talk," Skinner said firmly. "Save your voice. Just tell me where to find what I'm looking for."

She held out a key. "I've booked a room for you, sir."

"Thank you, Agent." He tugged at my sleeve. "Let her get some rest. We'll see you later." He actually bent and kissed her other cheek.

Scully and I exchanged astounded stares.

He moved toward the door. "Let's go, Mulder."

She caught my sleeve. "How did you get the black eye?"

I jerked a nod back in his direction. "He told you."

"Mul-der!"

I grinned at her and followed him out.

*****************************************************************************
The hotel was another surprise. A Southwest version of a Ramada. Very nice, clean and cool. Our room faced the pool. Skinner took the key Scully had given him and went to her room, and came back with a folder tucked under his arm. When I tried to get around him to get a look, he shooed me off with an expression that warned death was imminent. I decided to go sit in the shallow end of the pool and contemplate life.

This was a day for surprises all around. About two o’clock, Skinner came out, in jeans and a white shirt and brought me a beer, hunkering down at the edge of the terra cotta tiles. "Want to go for a drive?" he asked quietly.

Something stirred in me ... something about the tone of his voice ... something warm, inviting, reassuring. I took a sip of my beer and sat up, unwrapping my arm from the towel that protected the cast and climbed out of the pool. "Where are we going?"

"Wait on events, Mulder," he said quietly.

"I hate it when you do that," I murmured.

I could swear those broad shoulders shifted in a chuckle.

We drove about thirty miles outside of town. He was silent the whole way. My mind was spinning all kinds of wonderful and horrifying possibilities, from UFO landing sites to a really cool place to make out. But, we found neither. He stopped in front of a wooden fence and climbed out of the car to stare off into the distance. Then he came back to the car and gestured for me to roll down my window.

I did it, reluctantly. It was damned hot out there. Hadn't anyone mentioned to the Tex-Mex border that it was mid-autumn?

"Want to see where I was born?" he asked quietly.

Well, that did something to the pumper. I felt my heart tighten and then swell. "Yeah," I said, at a loss for anything pithy, "I would."

He came back to the car and slid under the wheel.

It never occurred to me that he had been born. I mean, I just never thought about him as a baby, as a child, as having family, best friends, secrets, hobbies, hopes and dreams. I sent my eyes over the horizon. Who would have thought such a man would come out of this desert?

He turned up a dirt road, and followed it for a long time. Gradually, trees appeared, other greenery, and I realized we were following the path of some local stream. At last he rolled to a stop under a stand of trees I couldn't identify, and pointed.

It was a small house. From my vantage point it looked to be stone and adobe. Low and sprawling in design. Wooden doors. It also looked abandoned.

I looked at him. There was something ... soft, thoughtful about his expression. "Here?"

He nodded. "We lived here until I was about nine, and then we moved up to Arlington."

I wanted to ask him about a hundred questions then, but he pushed the door open and climbed out. "Watch out for snakes," he warned, before shutting the door.

Well, I didn't particularly want to get out then, but I did. I wanted to see it up close, touch it,
remember it. It was a humble place and it must have been hard for him to share it with me. It
humbled me.

We didn't go in. But he took me around the back, and showed me the crumbling remains of a crude
hut that he and his father had built. It was a sort of playhouse/clubhouse, he said. He didn't elucidate
so I had a feeling that it was really more of a hideout than anything else. I saw the tree where his
swing once hung. I saw the tractor he once rode, now rusted and left behind like an unpleasant
memory. I saw where chicken coops once stood. I saw the post digger he used to help his father
build fences. I could almost envision him, bathed in sweat, struggling alongside his father, toiling the
land, and talking, laughing, working together. Shit. I felt a lump in my throat and went back to the
car.

He came back a while later, and we drove back to Mercedes.

We reached town just as the sun was setting. I was checking my watch for about the hundredth time,
wondering how Scully was, when he pointed. "We can call the hospital from a pay phone, Mulder.
Let's get a beer and cool off."

I glanced up the street. We were three blocks from the motel. But a beer did sound good. "Sure."

It was dark and cool inside the bar. It was almost empty. We slid up on stools and ordered a couple
drafts and he went to the back to call the hospital.

A moment later, he came back, looking anxious. "Mulder. I think you'd better go take this," he said.

Panic. I KNEW I shouldn't have let her have surgery here. I should have gotten her out in a hail of
bullets, if need be. Shitshitshitshitshit.

He followed me, his hand on my shoulder. "Just take it easy, Son," he said quietly.

I pushed through the doors to the back where the phones and restrooms and jukebox and televisions
were and suddenly heard, "Happy Birthday, Mulder!"

I skittered to a stop and felt Skinner's arm come around my waist. Scully, Sean, the Gunmen and a
man and woman I didn't know were standing around a table, with a cake and some gifts, laughing
and pointing at me.

Birthday. Damn it, I KNEW I forgot something. "What the hell is this?" I demanded.

"This," Scully said, in a very healthy voice, "is a surprise party."

"We knew we'd never pull it off in DC," Sean said with a laugh.

The man and woman came forward, out of the shadows, and I recognized them, even if I had never
met them. I knew those brown eyes. I knew that determined chin. I knew that bald head. I turned and
looked up at Skinner. He was watching me. "Sk-Skinner?" I stammered.

"Fox." He put his hand on my shoulder again. "I want you to meet my parents.

**************************************************************************

It was a hell of a party. I didn't realize that the Gunmen had been on to me for a while, but they took
it well. Frohike even confessed to me that he could understand the attraction to 'the big guy'.

Skinner's folks were a hundred and eighty degrees opposite my own parents, and welcomed me into
their son's life with such warmth and genuine affection that I envied him growing up with these
people.

Sean ribbed me good-naturedly about getting off my ass and reporting for duty. I got some very nice gifts. I got good and drunk. Skinner gave me a key-ring. With a key to his place. Official, I guess. I drank a little more.

We decided, even though it was only three blocks to the motel, that we should walk. Neither of us was in any condition to negotiate a rented car down a straight street a few hundred feet.

We were both staggering a little. I had a case of the giggles, I admit it. I was well and truly out, and the sky hadn't fallen. The man I loved loved me and told everyone so, including his parents. I hadn't been struck by lightning. My best friends saw him kiss me. The world didn't end.

Kiss me.

He looked down at me. "What?"

"Did I say that out loud?" I looked up at him and snickered.

"Yeah." He snickered right back, glanced around and muscled me in between two buildings. Trapping me between his body and a brick wall, he kissed me, thoroughly, making me want to get back to that hotel room real bad.

"Faggots."

We both turned. Two cowboys were standing on the sidewalk staring at us. I felt a measure of panic.

Skinner straightened up to his full six feet four, and came out of the shadows, his arm around my shoulder. "You got a problem with that, buddy?" he asked in a low, deadly voice.

One of them spit on the ground, narrowly missing Skinner's shoe. I felt him tense up, ready for a fight. I tugged at his arm. "Let the ignorant bastards go," I hissed. "Let them go."

I guess between the two of us, the two of them decided they didn't want a fight and they turned and walked away, but not without looking back at us darkly a couple of times.

"Bastards," Skinner said between his teeth.

"Let them go," I urged again. "They don't matter." I squeezed his arm, trying to get his attention, trying to bring back a fraction of the mood we had just been creating. "Let's go back to our room. Come on. I want you to blow out my birthday candle."

He relaxed then, and chuckled softly. "And then the birthday spanking, right?"

******************************************************************************

I could feel my knees digging into the concrete beneath the carpet. I could feel the ropes digging into my wrists. I could feel a trickle of sweat down my neck, slipping under my collar. I usually hate that feeling, but it didn't seem to disturb me all that much. Perhaps because it was a reassurance that I was alive. My life and death had been very much in doubt the past hour. Two armed men were waiting when I came back to the hotel room after taking Mulder to meet briefly with Sean. Two men waiting with fists and gun butts, and sneering words.

I had been in this predicament before. I knew there were decisions I had made, policies I had approved in my position as A.D. that people inside and outside the organization objected to,
sometimes violently. I could deal with that. Had done so. This was different. Their issue, it seemed was not Bureau related, but bedroom related. The one thing I focused on, the one thing I prayed for, was that Mulder would be his usual unreliable self, and not come walking in the door, walking into a trap.

I couldn't believe this was happening, not in my hometown. A couple of 'good ol' boys' had seen us together, decided there was something 'sick' about it, made the obvious leap of conclusion and set about to 'cure' me. I knew what their plans were, they had made them clear. Mulder was going to submit, or forfeit my life. Their caveman thinking was if I saw someone else touch him, I wouldn't want him anymore. What they didn't understand was that I would die rather than let anyone else touch him, and if I did see someone touch him, I'd kill the person who did.

The only thing I could find hope in, and it was a small thing, was that they wore masks, protecting their identity. They didn't mean to kill us. They only wanted to make us wish we were dead.

I heard the key in the lock, and felt something within me fail. I wanted to shout a warning, but I couldn't force the sound past the tape over my mouth. I could feel the metal of the gun brushing against my temple and I tensed, waiting for that moment when my life would end. It would end the minute they put a hand on him. I knew he'd submit. I had seen him do it. I had made him do it. The honor and loyalty of that man would put him on his knees for my life. I had to protect him, somehow.

The door opened. He was focused on something in his hands, smirking in bewilderment, then he sensed something was wrong and raised his eyes. His hand went to his hip, immediately, twelve years of habit. The Sig wasn't there anymore.

"I wouldn't try anything if I were you, boy," the one in the black ski mask said.

His eyes went to me, wild in horror and shock. Yet, he asked, "Are you all right?" in a voice so calm and quiet the fear couldn't possibly exist.

"Shut up!" the one in the red ski mask commanded.

He turned his eyes in that direction, and I could see the calm in them to match his voice. "You can't count on my cooperation if he's been hurt."

"Oh, you'll cooperate, boy," Black Mask was purring. I felt my stomach twist. He was going to enjoy this too much.

Mulder looked at him, blinked slowly. "Am I?" Just for a moment, I felt a little tingle of hope. I'd seen him do this. I'd seen him completely dismember the mental capacity of a psychopath. He never lost his composure, never gave them the leverage they needed. But, this ... could he get out of this?

"If you want to keep your Sugar Daddy alive, you will."

"Ah." Mulder nodded, shifted his stance, looking as if he was relaxing. "So that's what this is about." He flicked a glance toward Red Mask. "A little jealous?"

Red Mask reached back and smacked Mulder with his gun hand. Mulder stumbled backwards slightly, and blood began to trickle from his nose. I felt my muscles and bones struggle to get up, even though my brain knew I could not. They hit him. They hurt him. "Feel better?" he asked, sweetly.

"You mother fuckin' little faggot," Red Mask rasped, lunging for him.
Mulder seemed to be waiting for the blow and sidestepped him just at the right moment. "You're mixing your metaphors," he advised. Oh, Mulder, you're going to get us both killed, I thought, closing my eyes. But I was proud of him. He wasn't going to go down easily.

Red Mask came up again, gun drawn, aimed, none too steadily on Mulder's chest. "I'll kill you, you son of a bitch. Don't think I won't."

Mulder crossed his arms. "Just let him answer my question." His voice was so calm, his request so reasonable.

"Damn it, I'm gonna' --"

Black Mask hissed. He bumped the barrel of the gun against my head. "Nod. Tell him you're not hurt."

Mulder shook his head. "No, I want to hear him say it."

Mulder, what are you doing? I asked with my eyes.

"You're in no position to tell me what you want," Black Mask said.

Mulder only shrugged.

Black Mask reached down and ripped the tape from my mouth. It made my eyes sting, but I didn't cry out, which was what he wanted. "Now, answer him."

"I'm fine," I said flatly.

"You're sure? He didn't bump your head, knock you around?" Mulder insisted.

"Enough of this terms of endearment crap," Black Mask said. "Here's the way it's gonna' happen. You're going to be a good boy and show us the real meaning of Semper Fi, just like Daddy taught you."

I saw Mulder's face tighten, saw him swallow, but it was something only I would have seen.

Red Mask put a hand on Mulder's shoulder. "Otherwise, we blow Daddy's head off."

Mulder looked back at me. I was silently imploring him to fight, to run, to refuse. He wouldn't. His face was stone. White stone. He looked back at Red Mask, ghost of a grin on his face. "This is flattering."

"You think I want you, boy?"

Mulder's eyes dipped down, gauged the bulge in Red Mask's jeans. "I'd say you've been fantasizing about it for a long time."

"You little puke. I like women."

Mulder shrugged again. "Then you need a lesson in biology. I'm not a woman."

"You get in bed with a man, don't that make you a woman?"

Mulder's lips pulled back, showing teeth. "You want to get in bed with me, what does that make you?"
Oh, Mulder, don't, I thought, sighing inwardly. Still, you had to admire the balls on that guy.

Red Mask answered by bringing the gun butt down on the back of Mulder's head. With a stunned "Unh," Mulder went down on his knees. "That's right, you little faggot," Red Mask crooned, kneeling behind Mulder, stroking his hair with his gun hand. "Right where you belong." He looked up and grinned at me. "You watchin', Sugar Daddy?" He was pulling Mulder's arms behind his back. "Ever shared your sweet little faggot with anyone before?" He brought his gun hand up and stroked Mulder's cheek.

Mulder jerked away from his touch. "Do you know how many laws you're breaking right now?" he asked, in that maddeningly calm voice.

"You're the one breakin' the laws, faggot."

Mulder shrugged against his hold. "Comparatively, sodomy is a minor issue, even here in Texas. Whereas, what you're doing ..." He shook his head and tsked them, sounding like my mother. "Breaking and entering, kidnapping, unlawful restraint, rape, battery --"

"Shut up." He slammed his fist against Mulder's cheek again, right on top of the place Mulder had been battering himself nightly with his cast. Blood splattered from his nose across his white shirt, the carpet.

Mulder was a little woozy now, I could see him struggle to stay upright, and then finally stagger forward, catching himself with his palms, before he went face first into the floor. Now he was on his hands and knees, exactly where they wanted him. Red Mask caught his hair and pulled him back up, making him wince. I was so mad I would have broken every bone in their bodies, if I could have gotten free. "And what did you mention rape for, faggot?" he demanded. "It ain't gonna be rape. You're going to ask us, real sweet, to do you."

One of Mulder's eyes was starting to swell shut, but he still managed to cock a brow at his tormentor. "Am I?"

"That's right." I'd forgotten about Red Mask, standing beside me. "If you don't, we shoot Sugar Daddy."

Mulder shrugged, and managed to say through stiffening lips, "You'll do that anyway."

"We say we won't." Red Mask's voice was getting agitated.

"Come on, faggot." Black Mask was running his hand over Mulder's chest. "Ask me nice. I'll make you like it. I'll make you forget Sugar Daddy, real fast." He was rubbing his groin against Mulder's ass.

I had never felt more helpless, more impotent than I did, watching the disgust and fear playing on Mulder's face. He met my eyes, one of his blackened, his nose bloodied, his lip cut and swollen. For a moment, he looked defeated and then, incredibly, he started to smile. He shifted his head slightly, looked at the man molesting him. "Kiss me."

Black Mask stiffened in disbelief. "What the fuck?"

Mulder lowered his lashes, almost flirtatiously. "You want me? Kiss me."

"You are one sick man."

"You're the one getting your rocks off on my ass," Mulder returned easily. "You want me to ask
nice? Kiss me."

Red Mask barked, "You don't give the orders here, faggot."

"You know what a faggot is?" Mulder said.

My gaze jerked upward. I knew that tone of voice. That was the beginning of one of his free vend speeches. Had he lost his mind?

"What?"

Mulder shifted on his knees, so that he could look at the man who had stopped grinding his groin against him. "A faggot is a flaming coal, something or someone who is hot for something else." He smiled again. "If one were to look at this situation objectively, then you're the faggot, not me."

For a moment the fury in Black Mask's face was evident, despite his mask. He grabbed Mulder's hair, shoved the barrel of the gun up under his jaw. "I'm gonna' fuck you so hard you beg for mercy and then I'm going to blow your brains out."

I started to struggle against the ropes, but Red Mask twisted and kicked me in the gut. I was too mad, too scared to feel it. I just doubled over, letting all the air out of my body.

Mulder tore away from Black Mask's grip. "Walt," he cried. Black Mask pushed him forward again, landed on top of him and started scrambling for Mulder's belt. It was clear he wasn't going to wait for Mulder to ask nice. Mulder managed to lift his head and search my eyes. "Be careful," he gasped, squirming under the other man's weight. "Don't bump your head."

I looked up. Black Mask had his shirt pulled free and pushed up his back, he had managed to undo Mulder's belt and was working his fly. Mulder's hands were pushed to his sides, and he was trying to pull his knees up under him. His face was a definition of pain and disgust and desperation and then I saw what he was doing. I let myself go limp, almost in defeat. I waited.

Mulder's left hand got to his ankle just as Black Mask started to jerk his slacks down. Mulder's hand came up, the little black gun in his hand. Just as he pulled the trigger, I lifted my head, all my weight behind it, and banged against Red Mask's gun hand, causing him to let go with a yowl. As he scrambled for it, Mulder was there, on his knees, his smoking gun in Red Mask's face. "Huh uh," he said. He staggered to his feet, his pants falling around his knees, his shirt in tatters. He picked up Red Mask's gun, kicked Black Mask's gun out of reach. Black Mask was on his back, gasping and moaning, a red blossom blooming on his shoulder. Mulder pressed his gun against Red Mask's temple. "Untie him."


"No, I didn't," Mulder answered equitably. "Untie him. Your friend doesn't get medical help until you untie him."

"You bastard. Help him."

Mulder tilted his head forward, sighing, let Red Mask hear another bullet slide into the chamber, before turning the gun back toward Black Mask, who squealed and tried to roll away. "Untie him or your friend gets another chance to bleed to death."

Red Mask crawled toward me, and began to work the knots behind my back. Once my hands were released I turned and sent a fist through Red Mask's jaw. "Bastard," I said with feeling. I got to my feet and went to Mulder. "Are you all right?"
Mulder nodded. "I guess we'd better call the police," he said grimly. "I'm glad you got what I was trying to tell you."

I had to grin. I hadn't consciously 'gotten' it. But something in me responded somehow to something in him. We were in sync. I felt giddy with relief -- no, it was a victory. I staggered to the phone, but at that moment, there was a banging at the door. Evidently, Mulder's gunshot had aroused someone's concern. The door burst open, and three uniformed police officers burst in, guns raised. "Freeze. Police!"

"I'm Assistant Director Walter Skinner of the Federal Bureau of Investigation," I said, pointing to my wallet and badge, where I had dropped them on the table. From the corner of my eye, I could see Red Mask's eyes go round with shock. "These two men attacked me as I came into my hotel room this evening. They tied me up, they attacked my associate, and threatened both of us. My associate was able to disarm them, but was forced to fire his weapon in the process."

The three policemen looked over the situation. My bona fides were irrevocable. There were two masked men on the floor. Mulder was clearly battered. There was rope and tape on the floor. It sure looked like I was telling the truth.

"Are you all right, babe?" I asked softly.

He was lying beside me, still, barely breathing. He had been quiet all evening. Scully had tended to his wounds. The Gunmen were running checks on our attackers. We'd given our statements. My mother had rushed over to fuss over us. And now, finally, we were alone, in that narrow hotel bed. I wanted to hold him, comfort him, but I couldn't. He had been hurt. I hadn't been able to protect him. It wasn't merely his body that had been battered. His manhood, his identity had been assaulted as well. I felt as helpless as I had, taped and tied and waiting for him to return.


"Do you want to talk a --"

"No." He said it roughly. He sighed again. "No. Thanks. I'm okay."

"I'm sorry, Fox," I whispered, huskily. "I never would have brought you here if I had any idea --"

"It's okay. It wasn't HERE. It wasn't this place. But ... I wonder... is it always going to be like this?"

"No," I said emphatically. Then I paused. I couldn't promise him that. "But, if it was ... would you want to change things?"

He turned slightly, gingerly. I could feel him look up at me. "No."

"Do you mean that?"

He touched his lip, where he had taken five stitches. "This is temporary." He brushed my lips with gentle fingers. "This is forever."

-THE END-
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!